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# THE SECOND WORLD WAR, 1939-1945

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## FIVE VENTURES

*Iraq—Syria—Persia—  
Madagascar—Dodecanese*

BY

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

LONDON

HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

1954



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## FOREWORD

THIS volume, the sixth in the series, contains the remaining contributions of the late Christopher Buckley. His original draft has been carefully and sympathetically revised, making full use of the valuable comments received from official historians in the Commonwealth. Thanks are due to Australia for exhaustive notes on the account of the Syrian campaign, and to the Union of South Africa for additional matter concerning the operations in Madagascar.

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## CONTENTS

### IRAQ 1941

I. Danger in the East . . . . .	page 3
II. Grasping the Nettle . . . . .	24

### SYRIA 1941

I. Unwanted Campaign . . . . .	41
II. A Week's Progress . . . . .	63
III. Vichy Counterstroke . . . . .	80
IV. Capture of Damascus . . . . .	89
V. Towards the Inevitable . . . . .	103
VI. 'All's Well, Well Ended' . . . . .	120

### PERSIA 1941 . . . . . 141

### MADAGASCAR 1942

I. Diego Suarez . . . . .	165
II. The Long Road . . . . .	188

### DODECANESE 1943

I. Objective Rhodes . . . . .	211
II. No Accolade . . . . .	226

General Index . . . . .	245
Index to Formations and Units . . . . .	255



## MAPS

A. Syria—Iraq—Persia . . . . .	<i>Endpaper</i>
1. Ramadi—Habbaniya . . . . .	<i>page 18</i>
2. Falluja—Baghdad . . . . .	30
3. Lebanon and S.W. Syria . . . . .	50
4. Litani River . . . . .	64
5. Merjayoun—Jezzine . . . . .	72
6. Kissoue . . . . .	76
7. Damascus—Mezze—Jebel Mazar . . . . .	92
8. Palmyra . . . . .	104
9. Damour . . . . .	122
10. Diego Suarez . . . . .	172
11. Antsirane . . . . .	180
12. Harbour Entrance, Diego Suarez . . . . .	184
13. Madagascar . . . . .	192
14. Dodecanese . . . . .	212
15. Cos . . . . .	222
16. Leros . . . . .	230
B. Africa—Madagascar . . . . .	<i>Endpaper</i>

## ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Between pages</i> 38 and 39	R.A.F. Armoured Cars at Rutba Arab Legion Peace Again in Iraq: the Tigris at Baghdad Australian Sappers bridge the Litani
<i>Between pages</i> 54 and 55	Damascus Indian Troops near Damascus Free French Lebanon Landscape
<i>Between pages</i> 134 and 135	Coast-road to Beirut Essex Regiment at Palmyra
<i>Between pages</i> 150 and 151	Damour River Abadan: Indian Troops in Possession
<i>Between pages</i> 166 and 167	Persia: Off to Meet the Russians Diego Suarez Harbour
<i>Between pages</i> 182 and 183	Tamatave Landing South African Armoured Cars at a Road-Block
<i>Between pages</i> 198 and 199	King's African Rifles in Tananarive Leros Town and Castle from Alinda Bay
<i>Between pages</i> 214 and 215	German Bombers Attack Italian Batteries on Leros In Turkish Waters



IRAQ 1941



## CHAPTER I

# DANGER IN THE EAST

### Usurper's Chance ?

WHILE the last of the British forces were being evacuated from the mainland of Greece there developed a new and serious threat to the security of our Middle East position. Had the timing of this upheaval been a little better, or had Germany been ready and able to turn to account an opportunity she had helped to create, it is difficult to see how General Wavell would have been able to ride the storm.

The kingdom of Iraq owes its existence to the break-up of the Turkish Empire at the end of the First World War. The new state, composed of the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates and the north-western fringe of the great Arabian Desert, remained under British mandate from 1920 to 1930, ruled by King Feisal, ally of Britain and close collaborator of Lawrence in the desert revolt of 1916-18.

When Iraq became a full member of the League of Nations in 1930 the British mandate ended and a treaty was signed between Britain and Iraq. We were thereby entitled to maintain two air bases in the country, one at Shaibah near Basra, the other at Habbaniya on the Euphrates west of Baghdad. Both were stations on the air route to India and the Far East. No British garrisons were maintained in Iraq, the local protection of the air bases being confided to Assyrian levies, members of an ancient Nestorian Christian community in the upper valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. Britain, however, possessed by the treaty the important right of transit for her military forces through the country in time both of peace and war. If we found ourselves at war—which did not necessarily commit Iraq—we were to receive 'all possible facilities' including the use of railways, rivers, ports and airfields for the movement of our armed forces.

The Iraqi links (Habbaniya-Shaibah) in the air route between the United Kingdom and India became even more important to us in war than they had been in peace.<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of 1939 energetic Italian

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.



action in East Africa was still a reasonable assumption; the possibility of enemy attacks upon our communications through the Red Sea dictated the provision of the alternative route: Haifa, Baghdad, Basra and the Persian Gulf. Accordingly we had begun to improve the desert road leading eastward from Haifa towards Baghdad.

Perhaps even more important than the geographical position of Iraq were its rich deposits of oil situated in the northern part of the country around Mosul, Kirkuk and Khanaqin, and the fact that the Shatt al Arab, the final fifty-mile stretch in which Tigris and Euphrates merge to flow into the Persian Gulf, is the natural channel for the export of the oil from southern Persia.

The oil from northern Iraq is transported by pipe-line to Haditha on the Euphrates. Here the line forks, one branch passing south through Transjordan and Palestine to Haifa, the other north through Syria to Tripoli.

On the produce of these two oil areas Great Britain largely depended for the maintenance of her war effort. Let the Axis Powers once sever her connection with either and the consequences might be disastrous. Our air bases at Habbaniya and Shaibah were in reasonable proximity to the two vital regions but could hardly be considered a protection. We depended upon a friendly Government in Baghdad and the absence of any hostile action in Iraq.

Feisal had died in 1933, after the termination of the British mandate, and his son, Ghazi, who lacked character and prestige and was disinclined to co-operate with us, had been killed in a motor accident in 1939. At the outbreak of the War Amir Abdul Illah, brother-in-law and cousin of Ghazi, ruled Iraq as Regent for the four-year-old King Feisal II. Under the Regent's influence the Iraqi Government, never very stable, broke off diplomatic relations, though somewhat reluctantly, with Germany. In June 1940, however, they refrained from taking a similar step with regard to Italy, and the British Government, like Martha 'careful and worried about many things', was not concerned to press this issue. They did, however, secure the closing of the northern branch of the pipe-line that passed through the territory of Syria, now neutralized by the French defection.

The resounding military successes of Germany could not fail to have a profound effect upon the people of Iraq, especially when backed by a powerful propaganda. Victories are the most potent form of propaganda, and had 1940 been a year of Allied triumph it is not likely that any trouble would have developed in Iraq. As it

was, the indisputable achievements of German arms were ably seconded by the efforts of the Axis radio stations broadcasting in Arabic for the anti-British campaign. Nor were the Japanese, still technically neutral, behindhand in their efforts to undermine our position. Yet another hostile focus was provided by the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem who had taken sanctuary in the country.

As the year advanced it became clear that sooner or later a 'show-down' was almost inevitable. There were two factors to be constantly borne in mind as regards our policy in relation to Iraq. We could not, under any circumstances, allow any sort of infringement of our treaty rights; our very survival in the struggle with the Axis Powers might depend upon them. Equally, we wanted to avoid any clash that might inflame the Arab world against us and involve our scanty and widely stretched forces in the Middle East in yet a further military commitment.

With a view to improving relations with Iraq a new British Ambassador, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, a personal friend of the late King Feisal, had been appointed early in 1941; but owing to various delays he was unable to take up his post until matters had developed beyond the point where they could be dealt with solely by diplomatic means.

Political crises in Iraq were frequent, but a change of Government at the beginning of April 1941 foreshadowed serious trouble. Rashid Ali el Gailani, believed by our Intelligence service to be in German pay, became Prime Minister. He had the support of four prominent officers of the Army, Colonels Salah ed Din Sabbagh, Kamil Shabib, Fahmi Said and Mahmud Salman, popularly known as the 'Golden Square'.

Rashid Ali announced that his Government would fulfil all their international obligations and made special reference to the Anglo-Iraq treaty; but it caused us no surprise to learn that he contemplated the resumption of diplomatic relations with Germany. The Regent, however good his intentions, was powerless to curb the activities of the anti-British *bloc* which, with the help of German and Italian agents, continued to extend its influence throughout the Army and the Police and amongst the populations of the larger towns. The Arab desert tribes were not so easily swayed. On March 31st the Regent heard of a conspiracy to arrest him and, shortly afterwards, left Baghdad via Habbaniya for Basra, where on April 4th he was accommodated in a British warship.

In Baghdad a meeting of the 'National Assembly', packed with Rashid Ali's supporters, declared the Regent deposed on the grounds



of having sought personal popularity at the expense of King Feisal II and of working against the interests of the Army and of national unity.

On April 6th the German armies invaded Greece and Yugoslavia. It is too much to suppose that Rashid Ali was acting in close co-operation with Berlin. By this time the invasion of Russia must have been the principal concept in the mind of Hitler; and in any case he was not yet in a position to give important aid to the Iraqi movement. Nevertheless Rashid Ali must have been greatly encouraged by the German progress through the Balkans. The Nazi tide seemed to be flowing his way.

A Hitler directive dated May 25th—just before our final advance on Baghdad began, when the struggle for Crete was at its height and German penetration by air into Syria had become a serious threat—calls the Arab Freedom Movement in the Middle East ‘our natural ally against England’. This directive ordered the despatch of a military mission to Iraq, the employment of German air forces in that region, and the ‘delivery of weapons’. Germany had already sent assistance to Rashid Ali, but it had proved ‘too little and too late’. The reproach so often levelled at Britain here aptly describes the action of our enemy.

But in the early days of April, with Axis agents and their friends working against us, the state of affairs in Iraq was bound to engage the anxious attention of London and Cairo and also of New Delhi. We had no military forces located in or near Iraq if resort must be had to arms.

At Shaibah, sixteen miles south-west of Basra, was stationed No. 244 Bomber Squadron. At Habbaniya, on the Euphrates, sixty miles to the west of Baghdad, was located No. 4 Service Flying Training School (S.F.T.S.) and the headquarters of Air Vice-Marshal H. G. Smart, Air Officer Commanding in Iraq. On this uninviting terrain the Empire’s air necessities had created a veritable oasis in the wilderness.

A lofty and allegedly unclimbable steel fence studded with concrete blockhouses at intervals formed a perimeter seven miles in length, adjacent to the Euphrates. Within this enclosure had been constructed an airfield, half a dozen hangars, and a lofty water-tower. The compound contained also supply and fuel depots and ammunition dumps. It housed the officers and men of the station, with a number of civilian employes and their wives and families, and in addition for local protection duties, a battalion of levies, mainly Assyrian but including Arabs and Kurds, under a British

officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J. A. Brawn. The years of peace had seen the growth of tree-lined avenues bearing homely English names, together with such amenities as a golf-course, a polo-ground and a swimming-pool.

This ‘other Eden’, where rectangles of mown grass agreeably diversified the pattern of army huts and where carefully tended stocks, sweet peas and roses perennially bloomed, maintained something over eighty aircraft, some of them better qualified to decorate an aeronautical museum than to take part in the exacting operations of modern war. The total, after a slight reinforcement had been received, eventually consisted of the following types, many of whose names had an odd and unfamiliar ring even in 1941: Audax (32), Oxford (29), Gladiator (9), Gordon (8), Valentia transports (3), Blenheim I (1), and a few Hart trainers.

Less than one-eighth of this number could be regarded as capable of serious operational work and even a Gladiator or the solitary Blenheim was no sort of match for a Messerschmitt 109. But they were all that was immediately available, and as sinister reports began to filter through from Baghdad and elsewhere Smart set to work to train his pupils in bomb-aiming and air-gunnery from these obsolete and obsolescent machines.

To the aircraft and the native levies at Habbaniya and eighteen R.A.F. armoured cars which were also stationed there, must be added the solitary bomber squadron near Shaibah to arrive at the total force which at the beginning of April 1941 stood between the British Empire and an upheaval which threatened to throttle the flow of her oil supplies and cut her vital communications.

Against our insignificant array Rashid Ali could muster the four infantry divisions of the Iraqi army (two of them stationed around Baghdad, one at Kirkuk to keep a watchful eye upon the frequently restive Kurds, and one on the Euphrates south of Baghdad) and one mechanized brigade, composed of sixteen light tanks (mainly Italian), fourteen armoured cars (mainly British) and two battalions of lorried infantry. The equipment of the army was largely British, and many Iraqi officers had received their training in England. The Iraqi navy was insignificant, consisting only of four river gunboats; but the air force comprised about sixty fairly modern aircraft of various British, American and Italian types which, taken as a whole, were certainly more up-to-date and of better quality than those of the training school.



## Aid from India

OUR new Ambassador, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, had only reached Baghdad on April 2nd, too late, as has been said, for effective diplomatic action. Troops were needed for Iraq to safeguard our oil supplies and to secure our lines of communication through Basra to India; and although Iraq was a responsibility of Middle East Command General Wavell had no troops to spare. On March 31st the Germans had started an offensive in Cyrenaica which inflicted heavy losses and resulted in a British withdrawal across the Egyptian frontier. On April 8th our troops made their first contact with the invader in Greece. But it had already been foreseen that if any forces should be required for Iraq they would have to be supplied by India.

So it was that a brigade which was embarking at Karachi for Malaya (yet another preventive measure against a threatening war cloud) was diverted to Basra. The convoy sailed for its new destination on April 12th. It brought Major-General W. A. K. Fraser, commanding the 10th Indian Division, and one brigade of the division: the 20th (Brigadier D. Powell) consisting of the 2/11th Sikhs and the 2/7th and 2/8th Gurkha Rifles. The 3rd Field Regiment R.A., the 1st Anti-tank Battery, the 10th Field Company Sappers and Miners and the 41st Field Park Company were also in the convoy.

General Fraser's instructions were :

1. To occupy the Basra-Shaibah area in order to ensure the safe disembarkation of further reinforcements and to enable a base to be established in that area.
2. In view of the uncertain attitude of the Iraqi Army and local authorities, to face the possibility that attempts might be made to oppose the disembarkation of his force, planning his disembarkation in the closest concert with the officer commanding the Naval Forces in the Persian Gulf.
3. Should the embarkation be opposed, to overcome the enemy by force and occupy suitable defensive positions ashore as quickly as possible.
4. To take the greatest care not to infringe the neutrality of Iran [Persia].

To synchronize with the arrival of the convoy 400 officers and men of the 1st King's Own Regiment were to be flown from Karachi to Shaibah, the first wave arriving on April 17th. As soon as the

troops from the convoy were landed, this small airborne force would be flown on to Habbaniya.

Anxious days passed while the convoy was still at sea. The new Government of Iraq had been informed of our intention to exercise our rights in accordance with the treaty and there was some doubt about the nature of their reaction. The brigade on shipboard had not been embarked in readiness to make an opposed landing, and would assuredly be in difficulties if its disembarkation were resisted.

Fortunately, however, Rashid Ali was not quite ready, or at any rate he hesitated to precipitate open hostilities. Early on the morning of April 18th when the ships from India lay off the mouth of the Shatt al Arab, Major-General G. G. Waterhouse, head of the British Military Mission to Iraq, accompanied by a senior officer representing the Iraqi Army, came on board and informed General Fraser that no resistance would be offered. The troops landed, took over the protection of the dock area, the civil airport and the R.A.F. cantonment and organized their defences against possible attack by ground or air forces, also taking measures to deal with the spy and the saboteur.

For a moment all seemed harmony. The British Government issued a *communiqué* which announced that 'strong Imperial forces' had arrived at Basra to open up communications through Iraq in accordance with the Anglo-Iraqi treaty; that the new Iraqi Government was affording full facilities; that a warm welcome had been given to the Imperial troops by the local population; and finally that it was hoped that more normal relations between the two countries would soon be established.

The Iraqi Government issued an equally appropriate *communiqué* which added that 'the comments made by certain foreign [*i.e.* Axis] broadcasting stations were unfounded in fact'.

The Turkish Government also expressed their satisfaction at the move, which marked a step, though a small one, towards keeping open their threatened communications to the south.

Yet Rashid Ali and the military clique who supported him had taken a grave decision. The Iraqi Government informed the British Ambassador that no further British troops should be disembarked in the country until the force which had already landed had 'passed through'; and that at no time should the British forces in Iraq exceed the strength of one brigade.

This was a direct challenge. The second contingent of the 10th Indian Division was due to arrive at Basra on April 29th, and, with a view to diminishing the time during which the Iraqi Government and



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This was a direct challenge. The second contingent of the 10th Indian Division was due to arrive at Basra on April 29th, and, with a view to diminishing the time during which the Iraqi Government and



Army could take counteraction, the British Ambassador refrained from giving warning of the impending arrival of these troops until April 27th.

Meanwhile tension had been increasing within the country as Rashid Ali continued to show his hand more and more clearly. Iraqi forces were posted in occupation of the oilfields at Kirkuk and now proceeded to close the pipe-line to the British-mandated port of Haifa while opening that to the French-controlled port of Tripoli in Syria. The European personnel of the Anglo-Iraqi Petroleum Company were roughly handled; and, as a further gesture, a number of persons serving long-term imprisonment for an attack on the British consulate in Mosul in 1939 were ostentatiously released. The news of the imminent arrival of a second British contingent met with a reiterated refusal to agree to its landing until after the first should have passed through the country. As there was no question of our forces 'passing through' the country, no compromise was possible. It seemed that Rashid Ali had elected for war. He expected active military assistance from the Axis Powers, but he could not wait for it. Britain had already stolen a march by the landing of a brigade at Basra and threatened to get one move further ahead, so the Iraqi Premier decided that the appearance of the second contingent, which he was not yet prepared directly to oppose, should be the signal for a move against the isolated R.A.F. compound at Habbaniya. There is no doubt that he counted upon the arrival of German aircraft, if not of German airborne troops, before British action proved decisive.

## First Encounters

SINCE the early days of April the Habbaniya garrison had been on the alert, with frequent reconnaissance by aircraft and armoured car. Iraqi troops now began to piquet the bridge at Falluja and also the 'Iron Bridge' over the Washash Canal leading into Baghdad.<sup>1</sup> These measures interfered with traffic between Habbaniya and the British Embassy and drew a sharp protest from General Waterhouse to the Iraqi military authorities, a protest which had its effect. Control was relaxed and R.A.F. lorries with camouflaged loads were able to take into Baghdad rifles, sandbags, barbed wire, and other items needed to place the Embassy in a state of defence.

Tempers in Baghdad were rising, and at any moment an ugly

<sup>1</sup> Maps 1 and 2.

incident might explode the powder-magazine in that hot, overcrowded and excited city. On April 29th Rashid Ali gave Sir Kinahan Cornwallis his solemn promise that all British women and children should be allowed to leave the country in safety. Accordingly about 240 were sent to Habbaniya by road that afternoon; but no more could be despatched owing to the movement of large bodies of Iraqi troops who began to leave Baghdad by the Falluja road. About 350 British subjects, representing many races, were given shelter in our Embassy, while the American Legation afforded hospitality to 150 more. Some hundreds of others, less fortunate in finding sanctuary, suffered internment by the Iraqis.

At Habbaniya Smart had received the welcome reinforcement of 400 officers and men of the 1st King's Own Regiment, who, having been flown in relays from Karachi to Basra were sent on in Valentia transport aircraft. These arrivals brought the total number who could be used for defence of the station to about 2,000. But the Iraqi columns approaching along the desert road from Baghdad were estimated at anything from 5,000 to 8,000, and a further Iraqi force, a brigade strong, that same day, April 29th, occupied Ramadi, fourteen miles up the river beyond Habbaniya.

Some days earlier one Blenheim and six Gladiators had been received from the Middle East Command; but in view of developments elsewhere there was for the present very little likelihood of any more arrivals of aircraft at Habbaniya.

Confirmation of the approach of the Baghdad columns was contained in a cipher message from the Embassy, transmitted by wireless, early on the morning of April 30th, and air reconnaissance established the fact that Iraqi artillery were on a plateau overlooking the station. Since the escarpment of the plateau was barely more than 1,000 yards from the fence of the compound and completely overlooked the entire camp, the dominating and threatening position occupied by the Iraqi troops was immediately apparent. Strange as it may seem, the junior officers in this force had been told, and fully believed, that they were merely about to engage in a training exercise.

At six o'clock that morning an Iraqi officer appeared at the main gate of the compound to inform the British officer in command that Iraqi troops had occupied the neighbouring ridge for the purpose of training and to demand that none of our aircraft leave the ground and that our armoured cars keep within the compound. Otherwise the Iraqi artillery would open fire. On the ridge men were already digging trenches and installing anti-aircraft machine-guns, while armoured cars were patrolling towards the station.



The Iraqi demand was, of course, refused. Smart bluntly informed the envoy that any hostile action by the Iraqi troops would be regarded as an act of war and that immediate reprisals would follow. A second visit later in the morning with the same request met with an equally firm response.

Meanwhile Smart had signalled the Embassy to obtain authorization for him to take such measures as might be necessary to ensure the security of his command. As the Iraqis continued to reinforce (they eventually reached a strength estimated at 9,000 men and fifty guns) and to consolidate their position, Smart was driven to the conclusion that he must be the first to strike; otherwise Iraqi shell-fire from the ridge might destroy his heterogeneous collection of aircraft on the ground. And it was upon his aircraft that he must rely. His ground forces, now under the command of Colonel O. L. Roberts who had flown from the 10th Indian Division at Basra, possessed no supporting artillery, and the Assyrian levies were an unknown quantity if it came to battle. Moreover if the Iraqi chose to attack at night we could undertake no effective air defence.

Smart temporized throughout April 30th and the following day. He wished to gain what time he could for defensive preparations, and he had to obtain, via the Embassy in Baghdad, some clear indication from the Foreign Office of the general diplomatic line that was being followed. Fortunately, the local Iraqi commander showed himself hesitant to strike the first blow, and Smart was thus given the time he needed. While those of the station personnel who were not engaged in fuelling or bombing-up the aircraft were at work digging trenches, he began to fly out the women and children who had arrived from Baghdad in a shuttle service to Shaibah where our solitary bomber squadron had just been strengthened by a further eight Wellingtons from the Middle East. An air reconnaissance sent up on the evening of May 1st drew no fire from the Iraqi guns, but it revealed the considerable reinforcement of the Iraqi forces. It showed also that batteries were in position on either side of the river and there was a danger that the bund might be breached by shell-fire thereby releasing the flood waters of the Euphrates. The river, at that time and place, ran for ten miles above the level of the plain, so there was real danger that the whole cantonment might be speedily overwhelmed.

Late on May 1st the Air Vice-Marshal received Foreign Office authority to launch air attacks upon the Iraqi forces at his discretion. From the Prime Minister came a characteristic message urging him to strike hard if he struck at all.

So in the uncertain half-light which preceded the dawn of May 2nd every aircraft which could be coaxed into the air taxied out on to the runways and took off to attack the Iraqi positions. It was a queer assortment organized in four squadrons, three composed of bombers and one of fighters. Orders were to drive the Iraqi forces beyond artillery range of the cantonment, and targets were given the following priority: guns, armoured fighting vehicles (tanks), armoured cars, transport columns, troops.

When Habbaniya thus went into action at 5 a.m. the Iraqis responded to air dive-bombing and machine-gunning with anti-aircraft fire, and a bombardment of the cantonment, a bombardment which might almost have settled the issue but actually had very little effect. Iraqi officers subsequently told General Waterhouse that some of their number, who had been trained in England, had seen to it that the guns were laid so that no great damage should be done. On the other hand our efforts had been disappointing. The Wellingtons from Shaibah, operating in daylight as was certainly not their custom, had dropped about sixteen and a half tons of bombs in seventeen sorties, the S.F.T.S. nearly the same amount in 193 sorties; but the well-camouflaged Iraqi batteries had suffered no great harm and the enemy had not budged from the plateau. It is true that his infantry had shown no inclination to join in the fight: they appear to have sat in their trenches keeping their heads well down.

Iraqi fighters had intervened from time to time; and they had made one low-flying attack upon Habbaniya. We had lost five aircraft and many others were damaged, the S.F.T.S. operational strength being reduced from sixty-four to forty-two. Our casualties were thirteen killed and twenty-nine wounded—airmen, soldiers and civilians.

As the result of this remarkable battle the Air Vice-Marshal came to the conclusion that he could not only hold his own at Habbaniya but might carry the air attack to Iraqi airfields and lines of communication. If this seems a bold decision it proved to be amply justified by events.

But it is now necessary to look at the larger picture.<sup>1</sup> Blood had been shed not only at Habbaniya but also near Basra and at Rutba, a desert post and landing-ground near the Haifa pipe-line, over 180 miles west of Habbaniya.

At Basra itself though anti-British sentiment was being powerfully stimulated by Axis propaganda, the willingness to wound

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.



was overmatched by an even greater fear to strike. There was a boycott of our shipping by the dockside labourers, and on May 2nd, the day when the shooting started at Habbaniya, a sullen mob approached the positions held by the 20th Indian Brigade—only to disperse as soon as one of our 25-pdrs. fired a couple of rounds over their heads. The Iraqi police allowed themselves to be disarmed without trouble, but the general attitude of the local authorities was unco-operative in the extreme, while the worst elements of the population abandoned themselves with glee to their pleasing and traditional pastime of looting shops. Iraqi troops were known to be concentrated near Al Qurna, a village situated at the old point of junction of the Tigris and Euphrates, and bombers from No. 244 Squadron attacked them on this day causing some damage and casualties.

At Rutba on May 1st the Iraqi police who were stationed in a small fort opened fire upon our parties who were peacefully working on the Haifa-Baghdad road. Lieutenant-Colonel N. Hammond, chief engineer of the road, managed to get a great many of his people away to H4, a pumping station<sup>1</sup> and landing-ground on the Haifa road and pipe-line in Transjordan, about 130 miles from Rutba. Hammond himself was wounded and other British casualties amounted to eleven.

The situation was tense. We had certainly entered upon open war with the Iraqi armed forces and there was always the danger of German intervention. Fortunately Rashid Ali was not likely to provide a rallying point for any hostile Arab movement beyond the frontiers of Iraq; his position as a usurper of power did not make him *persona grata* so far as the Arab rulers were concerned. Abdulla of Transjordan was closely related to the Royal House of Iraq and at this moment had the Regent as his guest. The supremely able Ibn Saud of Arabia proper showed himself quick to rebuff the advances of Rashid Ali.

In Baghdad, the capital, the crowded Embassy was enduring a state of partial siege and after May 3rd was deprived of any opportunity of wireless transmission. The situation was not pushed to the extent of attempting to starve out the British officials and the large

<sup>1</sup> Pumping stations to maintain the flow of oil were situated at intervals along the pipe-lines. From Haditha, where the lines branched, the stations in the Haifa section were numbered onwards from H1; those in the Tripoli section from T1. Besides the necessary power-plant and quarters for the resident staff each station possessed defences sufficient to check local raiders.

numbers of civilians who had taken refuge there, and it was possible almost daily to buy provisions at the very gates of the buildings. For our people it was a time of suspense and inconvenience. Further hostile action was confined to that of the rude little Iraqi boys who chalked offensive epithets upon the paving stones outside the walls.

The peaceful disembarkation of Indian troops at Basra was satisfactory so far as it went, but an advance up the flooded Tigris upon Baghdad would take time and could not be undertaken by the small force available. As for Habbaniya, it was obvious that relief must come from the west—that is to say from the Middle East Command, not from India.

General Wavell, with critical operations in progress on the north and west of his Middle Eastern bastion, and with the campaign on the southern (Abyssinian) side by no means completed, was understandably reluctant to take on a further commitment if there were any way by which the Iraq situation could be resolved by negotiation and diplomacy. He had lost all the equipment and nearly a quarter of the men of one force in Greece; he had to face an imminent attack upon Crete; the defence of the acutely threatened Nile Valley from Rommel's armoured columns in the Western Desert demanded all the strength he could assemble; Malta needed reinforcing; and Syria was already causing grave anxiety. So Wavell pointed out to the authorities at Home that if he went to Habbaniya he would have to bluff his way through with quite inadequate forces. For the moment he could only call upon one mechanized brigade, which would have to be improvised from the 1st Cavalry Division. This brigade was incompletely supplied with transport and essential weapons and not yet adequately trained for a mechanized rôle. He could provide neither tanks nor armoured cars and very few aircraft. Such a force he regarded as quite inadequate and liable to prove an incitement rather than a deterrent to rebellion. Moreover, it would leave Palestine dangerously weak against the possibility of an attack through Syria.

This, of course, was indisputable, but stern necessity compelled some weakening of the main bastion. It was the chronically recurring dilemma which Wavell had so often had to face in the Middle East during the past year. Only he, it seemed, could accomplish the relief of Habbaniya where eleven Iraqi battalions hung like a thundercloud upon the escarpment overlooking the R.A.F. cantonment. And it must be done.

Wavell decided that a necessary preliminary to a move on Habbaniya from the west was the occupation of the H4 pumping station



which would provide the R.A.F. with a convenient landing-ground in the operations to intercept German aircraft on their way eastward. So H4 was made the destination of a company of the 1st Essex Regiment flown there from Palestine; and the airborne infantry were duly followed up by a mechanized squadron of the Transjordan Frontier Force and by a detachment of Major Glubb's Arab Legion. This picturesque body, recruited from families of the desert sheikhs and the leading tribes between Jordan and Euphrates, was to play a considerable part in the fighting in Iraq and Syria during the coming weeks. Glubb Pasha, with twenty years' desert experience behind him, and a thorough knowledge of the Arab mind and outlook, proved an admirable leader for these warriors, who by their impressive appearance, sweeping robes and long flowing hair gained among our troops the sobriquet of 'Glubb's Girls'. Possessed of courage, cunning, endurance and initiative, they proved not only invaluable in scouting and reconnaissance but distinguished themselves in several clashes with our enemies in Iraq and Syria. We shall encounter Glubb's Girls again in our narrative.

The force organized for the relief of Habbaniya and subsequent operations in western Iraq consisted of the 4th Cavalry Brigade (Brigadier J. J. Kingstone) made up of the Household Cavalry Regiment, the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry (less one squadron) and the Warwickshire Yeomanry. The cavalymen had handed in their horses not so long ago and now moved in not-so-new 15-cwt. trucks. Their drivers had been hurriedly trained, and it had been hard to find the necessary mechanics. To these regiments were added the 1st Essex; a mechanized regiment of the Transjordan Frontier Force; the Arab Legion; the 60th Field Regiment (less one troop); an anti-tank troop; a troop of the 2nd Cheshire Field Squadron R.E.; and ancillary services, including part of a well-boring unit. The whole was commanded by Major-General J. G. W. Clark and christened 'Habforce'. Its task was to make contact with the garrison of Habbaniya and assist it in securing its defences, communications and supplies; keep open the route from Transjordan by way of the pipeline; protect such points between H4 and Habbaniya as might be required for R.A.F. operations; and to facilitate friendly contact with the Arab tribes.

Habforce was to have much to do in Iraq and Syria during the next two months. Its concentration in Palestine took a little time, for transport had to be provided from Egypt. Meanwhile Habbaniya is the centre of interest.

## Self-Help at Habbaniya

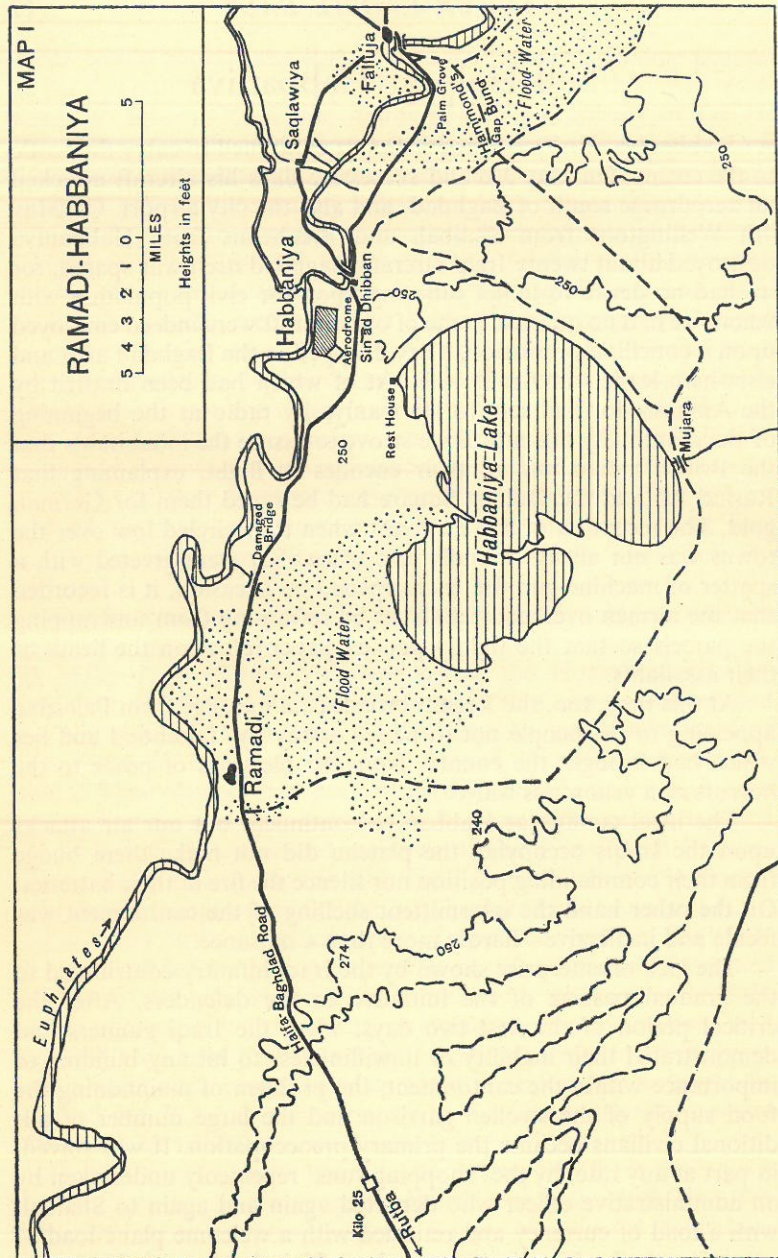
AT Habbaniya Air Vice-Marshal Smart continued to carry the battle to the enemy. On May 3rd and successive days his aircraft attacked an aerodrome south of Baghdad, and also the city airport. On May 4th Wellingtons from Shaibah and Blenheims from Habbaniya destroyed about twenty Iraqi aircraft. Baghdad itself was spared, for we had no desire to inflict suffering upon the civil population with whom we had no quarrel. Some of our aircraft were indeed employed upon a conciliatory mission. They dropped in the Baghdad area and elsewhere leaflets in Arabic the text of which had been drafted by the Ambassador and sent to Habbaniya by radio at the beginning of the month. By this means we strove to assure the inhabitants that the British would put all their enemies to flight, explaining that Rashid Ali and the Golden Square had betrayed them for German gold. The reception of these aircraft when they circled low over the towns was not always friendly and when they were greeted with a spatter of machine-gun fire, as happened on occasion, it is recorded that the airmen overhead retaliated by refraining from unwrapping the parcels so that the tightly packed paper fell upon the heads of their assailants.

At this time, too, the Regent broadcast a message from Palestine appealing to the people not to be led astray by 'falsehood and lies which had brought the country from the blessings of peace to the horrors of a venomous war'.

The local conflict at Habbaniya continued, but our air attacks upon the Iraqis occupying the plateau did not make them budge from their commanding position nor silence the fire of their batteries. On the other hand the intermittent shelling of the cantonment was feeble and ineffective—hardly more than a nuisance.

The lack of enterprise shown by the Iraqi infantry contributed to the gradual passing of the initiative to the defenders. After the critical period of the first two days, when the Iraqi gunners had demonstrated their inability or unwillingness to hit any building of importance within the cantonment, the problem of maintaining the food supply of the swollen garrison and the large number of additional civilians became the primary preoccupation. It was solved, in part at any rate, by the 'shopping runs' repeatedly undertaken by an administrative officer who departed again and again to Shaibah with a load of currency and returned with a welcome plane-load of groceries. And while hearts were kept high (with brisk betting in





'the irresponsible English manner' on the prospects of the water tower catching a direct hit) our ground forces became active.

Several successful forays were carried out on the northern bank of the Euphrates, and our night patrols established an unquestioned supremacy with the result that the enemy came to withdraw his outposts at dusk, and soon surrendered his interest in the whole area of no-man's-land. A successful means of checking night bombardment by Iraqi guns had been found by the operation of air patrols after dark. This proved a hazardous business, for the aircraft had to make a blind take-off and, in the necessary absence of a flare-path, each had to guide itself in by the light of its own landing-lamp, hurriedly switched on when the plane reached the 50-foot level and switched off again as soon as it touched down. It was a bold piece of improvisation and it served its purpose, but inevitably the rate of wastage was high and the number of aircraft that could be employed was limited.

Harried in front and harassed by air attacks upon their line of supply—particularly at the bottle-neck of the Falluja river crossing—the Iraqi besiegers were, in a great measure, themselves besieged. Then a blow was struck which proved altogether too much for them. On the night of May 5th/6th fighting patrols of the King's Own and of the Assyrian levies raided the village of Sin ad Dhibban (a name with the fearsome meaning of 'The Teeth of the Wolf') which lay below the northern end of the escarpment, by the river. Taken by surprise, seeing that their outposts obeyed the Swinburnian dictum that 'night is for slumber and sleep' the Iraqis suffered considerable loss in killed, wounded and prisoners, and when day dawned the whole of their forces appeared to be in retreat.

Without loss of time one company each of the King's Own and the Assyrians moved forward. A fire fight ensued, for some of the Iraqi infantry opened with their automatic weapons; but R.A.F. armoured cars then began to worry their southern flank and some of our aircraft gave support by close bombing attacks. For good measure, two ancient howitzers—relics of the 1916-18 Mesopotamia campaign—which had decorated the main gate of the cantonment, came into action: they had been reconditioned by artificers of the Royal Artillery flown from Basra and a certain amount of ammunition had arrived in the same way. The moral effect of this fire was considerable. When a few 4.5-inch shells began to burst among his troops the enemy became convinced that heavy artillery had been flown into Habbaniya.

On the left the King's Own swept through Sin ad Dhibban and gained the high ground beyond. On the right the Iraqi infantry



began to flee before the Assyrians who had proved themselves stout and determined fighters. The day was ours. We had gained the plateau. And an attempt of the Iraqi command to rush up reinforcements—motorized infantry and guns—by the one available route, the road from Falluja, had ended in disaster. Subjected to attack by our aircraft as soon as they had crossed the Euphrates the convoys of lorries found movement off the road impossible owing to the flooded ground, and for two hours the R.A.F. bombed them at will. First the rear and then the front of the column was attacked, the wrecked vehicles at both ends trapping those in the centre. The Iraqis lost about seventy vehicles and their total casualties on this day of extraordinary happenings amounted to over 500 killed and wounded and more than 400 prisoners.

Habbaniya had accomplished its own relief at remarkably little cost—less than forty killed and wounded. Some of these casualties had been caused by Iraqi aircraft which had made several attacks upon Habbaniya, destroying three of our aircraft upon the ground and damaging another. The spoils of war were considerable. Our troops were occupied for some time in collecting the arms and equipment abandoned in the positions on the plateau—a few 3·7-inch howitzers, two anti-tank guns, forty-five Bren guns, sixteen machine guns, ten armoured cars, one light tank, three ‘dragons’ (gun-tractors) and quantities of rifles and ammunition.

On this day the Air Vice-Marshal had not confined himself to local action. In many sorties flown from Habbaniya and from Shaibah aircraft were destroyed on an aerodrome south of Baghdad; and the barracks at Washash, on the western side of Baghdad were bombed. Before dark a Gladiator dropped a report of the day’s proceedings into the British Embassy—heartening news for the Ambassador.

## The Only Course

ON the 6th May the 21st Indian Brigade (4/13th Frontier Force Rifles, 2/4th Gurkha Rifles and 2/10th Gurkha Rifles), under the command of Brigadier C. J. Weld landed at Basra from India.<sup>1</sup> Also in the convoy were two troops of the 13th Lancers (armoured cars) and a detachment of Indian sappers. Next day arrived Lieutenant-General E. P. Quinan to command what was known later as ‘Iraq Force’.

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.

Our troops were now numerous enough to take over a further portion of Basra, including the main telegraph office and the wireless station. As they did so there was some sniping from windows and house-tops and a few Gurkhas were killed.

The civil officials of the city continued to take a holiday from their posts, an example readily followed for a time by the dockside labourers and by the crews of dredgers which habitually kept the channel of the Shatt al Arab free from silt. But the danger of hostile action had now practically passed, and the time had arrived for the employment of our Basra force to assist in finally clearing up the situation inside the country and re-establishing our lines of communication.

The course of events was bound to influence our policy, one factor being the signs, which were now apparent, of active German intervention. On May 7th the first German aircraft touched down at Syrian aerodromes *en route* for Iraq. In accordance with instructions from the Vichy Government they received every facility for continuing their flight. Next day their first air component reached Mosul, partly by air and partly in lorries supplied by the French.

Later we learned that during the month of May the French sent from Syria into Iraq four railway-truck loads of arms and ammunition, and two trains loaded with aviation spirit and a battery of artillery. Ironically enough we were the gainers by this act of malignant generosity. It is quite certain that the Vichy troops would themselves have made better use of this material during the subsequent fighting in Syria than the recalcitrant Iraqis were able to do.

On the brighter side of the picture were the persistent rumours that Rashid Ali was losing the confidence of his supporters and had become fearful of the future.

General Wavell still had hopes that the situation might be restored by diplomatic methods, the withdrawal of the Iraqi forces from Habbaniya seeming to provide a fresh basis for negotiation. Responsibility for Iraq which had been handed over to the Indian Command when Indian troops landed at Basra on April 18th had reverted to Middle East Command on May 5th when it was seen that the relief of Habbaniya from the west must take precedence of any other operation; and Wavell had ample cause to fear a further drain upon his resources. He had already allotted all the troops that he could spare.

General Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief in India, however, saw no alternative to energetic action against the Iraqi army and the occupation of the key points in the country with special reference to



the oilfields in the north. Consequently Lieutenant-General Quinan had left India with orders to this effect and a warning that he might have to cope with a German invasion through Syria. Then, after landing at Basra, where he came under Wavell's command, he received orders to do no more than to safeguard the Basra base and to open up communications with Baghdad 'if Iraqi co-operation were secured'.

It is not, perhaps, surprising that Wavell and Auchinleck, who shouldered different responsibilities, should have held differing views. The War Cabinet at home would have favoured converging advances, with all speed, upon Baghdad from the west and from the south; but they realized that to cover the three hundred miles of country—mostly flooded—between Basra and the capital—was liable to be a rather tedious operation. So it was decreed that all should be staked upon the bold and resolute advance of Habforce. Wavell had to extend his risk. Having reached Habbaniya a force which could be numbered in hundreds only must then press on without delay, overawe or brush aside all opposition, overcome every natural or contrived obstacle, and count upon its mere presence at the threshold of the capital to bring about the downfall of the usurper.

General Clark was therefore given fresh orders: after Habbaniya had been reached he was to send a column forward to regain contact with the British Ambassador in Baghdad; the Tigris was not to be crossed, but the west bank should be occupied and the Iraqi arsenal, east of the river, brought under artillery fire.

From Habbaniya our aircraft continued to strike at the Iraqi aerodromes from Al Musaiyib, forty miles south of Baghdad, to Mosul in the north. On May 13th a German fighter attacked one of our Blenheims over Mosul, and on the night of May 14th/15th we carried out successful attacks upon camouflaged aircraft on the ground at Erbil and Mosul. The *Luftwaffe* was, undoubtedly, entering the fray, and on the 16th three German fighters attacked Habbaniya, with loss to both sides; we made another successful attack on Mosul and engaged Messerschmitts near Baghdad and over the city. Useful reinforcements—Blenheims and Hurricanes—were arriving in dribbles at Habbaniya from the Middle East Command.

It is noteworthy that on the night of May 14th/15th we began our attacks upon the Syrian aerodromes which were being used by the Germans. Palmyra was bombed to some effect, and throughout the rest of the month our aircraft repeatedly attacked the four main Syrian airfields—Aleppo, Damascus, Rayak and Palmyra. We also

continued our attacks upon Erbil and Mosul, and may pride ourselves upon the fact that German action and Vichy connivance to aid Rashid Ali and keep the rebellion simmering in Iraq were more than matched by the activities of the R.A.F. The Iraqis themselves contributed to their own discomfiture by irresponsible shooting at the aircraft bringing Major Axel von Blomberg to Baghdad. This officer, who came to direct *Luftwaffe* operations in Iraq, was found to be dead when the aircraft made its landing.



## GRASPING THE NETTLE

## To Habbaniya—and Falluja

WE must now follow the fortunes of Habforce which was about to play one of the leading parts in this unique campaign.

Major-General Clark was well aware that only a small mobile force could accomplish a swift desert march from the Mediterranean coast to Habbaniya. The distance from the Palestine frontier by the Haifa-Baghdad road is over 470 miles; all supplies had to be carried; flood water was certain to be encountered; and drinking water might have to be used with rigid economy. Accordingly he had organized part of his troops as a flying column under Brigadier Kingstone which had been concentrated upon the Palestine coast. It was known as 'Kingcol', and the fighting troops consisted of the Household Cavalry Regiment, a battery of the 60th Field Regiment, an anti-tank troop, a troop of sappers, and two companies and a carrier platoon of the 1st Essex—in all, 2,000 men and 500 vehicles.

Kingcol started its march on May 11th and arrived at Mafrag in Transjordan that day. On the 12th the column passed through H4 and reached the Iraq frontier where the good metalled road ended and a very indifferent one began. The frontier was crossed in the afternoon of the 13th and at H3, the next pumping station, Kingcol was met by Squadron-Leader L. V. Casano commanding No. 2 Armoured Car Company, R.A.F., which had driven up from Egypt to join Kingcol. The armoured cars had already been in action, and Casano was able to report that Rutba and the Rutba area was already under control.

On May 9th Blenheims from H4 had made an ineffective attack upon Rutba fort, held by the Iraqi police whose rifle fire did some damage. An old enemy of the British, one Fawzi Qawukji—he had been unpleasantly prominent during the Palestine revolt of 1936—then appeared with forty trucks filled with well-armed men. After exchanging fire with Casano's cars Fawzi disappeared eastward and

the fort was again subjected to air attack and again with little effect. But these attentions, combined with the activities of the armoured cars, and of the Arab Legion who were never far from the scene of strife, induced the recalcitrant policemen to abandon Rutba before the dawn of May 11th.

Kingstone pushed on to Rutba, where he found Glubb and his Arabs in possession, and learnt that Iraqi troops held Ramadi—almost unapproachable owing to the surrounding floods—but that the only other enemy force west of Baghdad appeared to be the host which had hurried away from Habbaniya and now occupied positions covering the Euphrates bridge leading into Falluja.<sup>1</sup>

On May 15th Kingcol moved eastward by desert tracks towards Habbaniya, covering 160 miles before bivouacking at 'Kilo 25', a point fifteen miles from Ramadi. In the course of the march a number of German aircraft swept over the troops, who possessed no means of making an adequate reply, and machine-gunned them at low levels, causing a number of casualties.

Before dawn of May 16th the march was resumed in the hope that, by making a detour to the south to avoid Ramadi, Habbaniya would be reached that night. At first all went well. Then the 3-ton lorries began to break through the hard desert crust and to sink in the soft sand beneath. These heavy vehicles had to be dug out again and again with tremendous effort and in a temperature which approached 120 degrees in the shade; and from being difficult progress became impossible. Kingstone signalled Habbaniya that he could not get through and was withdrawing to Kilo 25. The column, with the men tired but still in good heart, reached its old bivouac in the evening.

If Habbaniya could not be reached quickly it would be necessary to return to Rutba to replenish supplies of fuel and water which were running low. Next day, however, the Arab Legion discovered a route which led to the cantonment by way of Mujara, a collection of huts and engineering yards south of the lake. Here the garrison had repaired, and now guarded, a bridge over the deep channel which formed the lake escapement.

So a fresh start was made at 5 a.m. on May 18th, and the last stage of the advance to Habbaniya was accomplished without a halt or check. Kingcol went into bivouac near the lake, having had five more men hit by German fighter attack. Its arrival almost coincided with the launching by the Habbaniya garrison of a fresh and most gratifying enterprise.

<sup>1</sup> Map 1.



Air Vice-Marshal Smart, most unfortunately, had been badly injured in a motor accident on May 15th. He was flown away to hospital at Basra two days later. On the 18th when Air Vice-Marshal J. D'Albiac<sup>1</sup> arrived to take over the air command he found the Habbaniya garrison putting the finishing touches to its preparations for the capture of Falluja which was to be a combined air and ground performance with the R.A.F. playing the lead.

Habbaniya's striking power had been increased by the trickle of reinforcing aircraft already mentioned; also by detachments of the 2/4th Gurkhas flown up from Basra, and the 1st Essex (less the two companies with Kingcol) transported in the same fashion from H4.

The advance upon Falluja was to be carried out on both sides of the river, our troops moving into their forward positions during the night of May 18th/19th. The northern force, organized in three columns, consisted of one company each of Gurkhas and Assyrians, some 3·7-inch howitzers and a number of armoured cars. All these troops crossed the Euphrates at Sin ad Dhibban by means of pontoons worked on hawsers across the swiftly flowing river. The way to Falluja lay through the village of Saqlawiya, but the river crossing and the country beyond proved so difficult to negotiate that the battle was won before any of the northern force appeared upon the scene.

However, a company of the King's Own was flown without mishap to a point on the track running from Falluja to Notch Fall—the site of a sluice—whence it would be able to prevent the approach of reinforcements by keeping the Falluja-Baghdad road under fire.

The advance upon Falluja from the south-west was entrusted to a company of the levies under Captain A. Graham. As this detachment had to negotiate a gap in Hammond's Bund—the causeway which crossed the flood water and joined the main road near the bridge—the Assyrians were first practised in small-boat work using craft borrowed from the R.A.F. Boat Club.

The actual crossing of the gap and advancing along the bund in the darkness encountered certain difficulties—some mules refused to face the unknown—but Graham's people were safely ensconced in their allotted position, a palm grove adjoining the main road about a mile from Falluja bridge, before 5 a.m. on May 19th.

At that hour fifty-seven aircraft began to bomb the Iraqi positions in and about Falluja. These attacks continued intermittently throughout the morning, while at intervals leaflets which urged the Iraqis to withdraw were showered down. Then, as the Iraqis had

<sup>1</sup> He had commanded the R.A.F. in Greece.

shown not the slightest sign of moving, at 2.45 p.m. the R.A.F. delivered a dive-bombing attack against the trenches west of the bridge. Ten minutes later Graham's Assyrians issued from their palm grove and advanced, machine-guns and mortars firing in close support and the little howitzers also covering the movement.

It was a 'walk-over', for Iraqi resistance, never more than passive, collapsed at once. Graham had no trouble in securing the bridge intact and occupying the town beyond, where many prisoners were made. The airborne party arrived after the levies had taken possession.

We had lost not a single man. The R.A.F. bombardment had achieved its object by thoroughly cowing the defence: prisoners said that they had not dared to leave cover to pick up the leaflets calling upon them to cease resistance. The Assyrians had shown themselves good warriors. Their attack recalls the descent of the wolf on the fold; and if the slouch hat and khaki drill form a drab contrast to the recorded purple and gold of an earlier age their wearers were distinctly more successful than the cohorts of Sennacherib.

It seemed as though the road to Baghdad was now open; but before Kingcol could resume its advance the Iraqis, rather surprisingly, delivered a counter-attack designed to recover Falluja and drive us back across the river. This operation, launched with some skill, may have owed something to those 'technicians' who were always among the first Nazi arrivals.<sup>1</sup> It certainly owed more to the fact that an exercise of this precise nature, over the same ground, had been carried out by an Iraqi brigade in the autumn of 1939.

Before it was light on the morning of May 22nd an attack was made upon the King's Own on the north-eastern side of the town and our men were forced to withdraw into the houses. Two light tanks entered the streets but one was wrecked in a bomb crater and the other put out of action by fire from an anti-tank rifle. After some of the Assyrians had become engaged the situation was fully restored. Shortly afterwards the south-eastern side of Falluja, also held by the King's Own, was attacked; but the repulse with loss of the Iraqis after a brisk encounter marked the end of the action. Our losses, which fell chiefly upon the King's Own, amounted to over fifty.

The S.F.T.S. had bombed Iraqi reserves as they advanced towards Falluja, and also exploded a truck-load of gun-cotton

<sup>1</sup> Prisoners afterwards stated that German staff officers were with the Iraqi forces.



which was obviously intended for the demolition of the bridge. The German aircraft proved surprisingly ineffective during these days: they seemed content to make spasmodic raids on Habbaniya when their presence would have been so much more useful to the Iraqis at Falluja.

Soon after the first alarm had been given General Clark, who was present in Habbaniya, had sent Brigadier Kingstone forward to take command in Falluja. The troops of Kingcol were held in readiness to reinforce the garrison but were not required to do so while the action was in progress. In the early hours of the 23rd a squadron of Household Cavalry was ordered up by way of Hammond's Bund and two companies of the Essex were also brought into Falluja. Many Iraqi troops had exchanged their khaki for white civilian clothes and remained in the town, so, as a precaution against sudden attack, about 1,300 Arabs were expelled from the place. And a few snipers who were not in uniform were caught and shot.

At Basra,<sup>1</sup> where on May 16th Brigadier W. J. Slim had succeeded Major-General Fraser in command of the 10th Indian Division, our troops were by no means inactive. It was necessary to obtain control of a number of settlements and villages on the banks of the river above the city, snipers and malcontents bent on robbery being the chief enemy. The local officials remained aloof rather than hostile, and popular feeling was intensely national; but the British were certainly preferred to the Germans if the presence of foreigners had to be endured. It was unfortunate that so many Iraqis expected the victory of the Axis Powers and had a wholesome fear of favouring the losing side.

The Wellington bombers at Shaibah, which by 11th May represented half the heavy-bomber effort of the Middle East Command, were withdrawn on that and the following day. It was then left to naval aircraft from H.M. carrier *Hermes* to strike at military objectives located at An Nasiriya, Amara, Samawa and Al Qurna; but the carrier was recalled to sea about May 19th.

General Wavell arrived at Basra by air on May 23rd to meet General Auchinleck who was coming from India. Kingcol, of course, was at this time preparing to start upon the last stage of its desert march: from Habbaniya to Baghdad. General Quinan now received orders to move on the capital from Basra as soon as possible, by the best available route.

The two Commanders-in-Chief were mainly occupied with a

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.

larger question. Wavell, with his many preoccupations, was more concerned with the potential dangers which Syria held for him than he was with the pacification of Iraq: it was soon agreed that, when communications had been fully restored, Iraq ought again to become the responsibility of India. This course was approved by the authorities at Home and eventually followed.

## On to Baghdad

THE capture of Falluja,<sup>1</sup> which was now securely in our hands, had opened the door for Kingcol to pass through and make the venture which was to crown our endeavours with success.

First it was judged expedient to subdue the isolated garrison of Ramadi which proved impervious to attack by leaflets and bombs alike. On May 25th a considerable force moved out of the town and engaged a patrol from Habbaniya which was obliged to abandon two armoured cars stuck fast in soft sand. Only one of these was recovered. The Iraqis in Ramadi gave no other sign of aggressive intention, remaining upon the defensive until the suspension of hostilities at the end of the month.

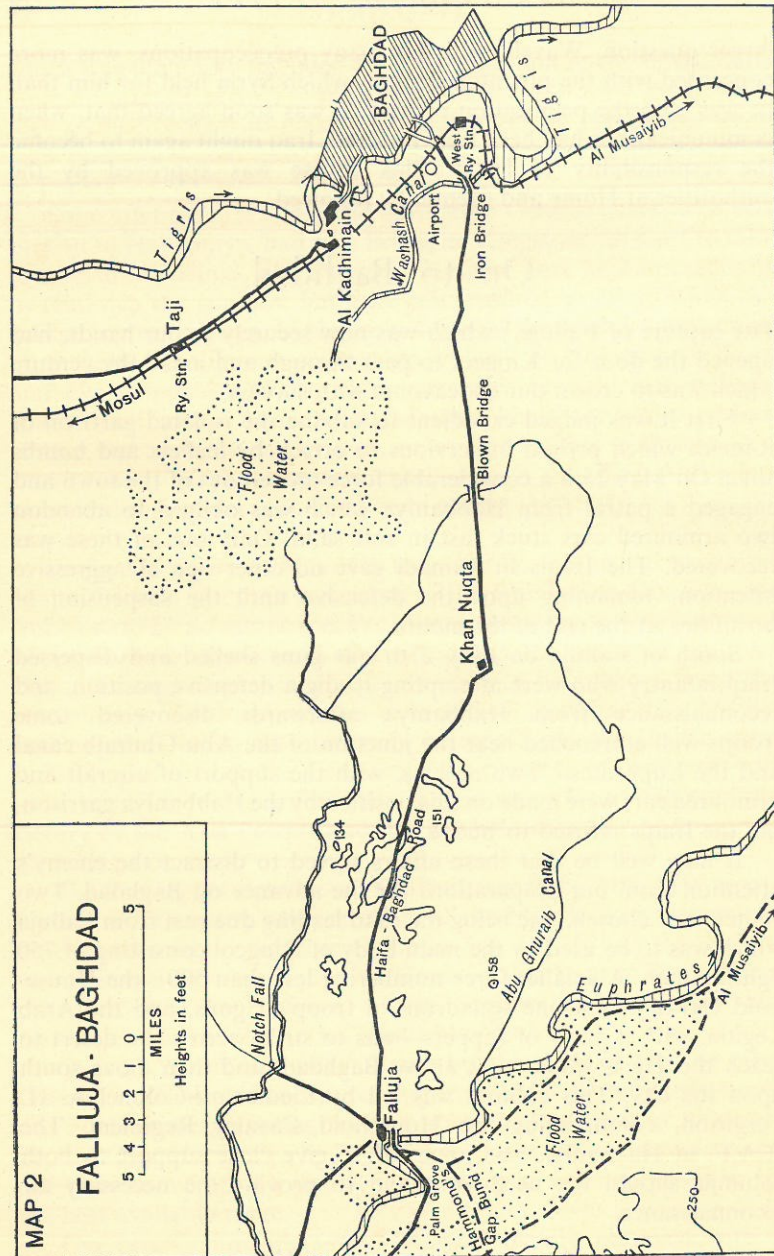
South of Falluja on May 27th our guns shelled and dispersed Iraqi infantry who were attempting to dig a defensive position, and reconnaissance from Habbaniya afterwards discovered some troops well entrenched near the junction of the Abu Ghuraib canal and the Euphrates.<sup>2</sup> Two attacks, with the support of aircraft and armoured cars were made on this position by the Habbaniya garrison, but the Iraqis refused to budge.

It may well be that these affairs served to distract the enemy's attention from our preparations for the advance on Baghdad. Two routes were chosen, one being the road leading due east from Falluja which was to be used by the main body of Kingcol consisting of 750 fighting men. A smaller force numbering less than 500—the Household Cavalry (less one squadron), a troop of guns, and the Arab Legion, with a party of sappers—was to strike across the desert to reach the Tigris some miles above Baghdad, and then move south upon the city. This column was led by Lieutenant-Colonel A. H. Ferguson, commanding the Household Cavalry Regiment. The R.A.F. at Habbaniya was prepared to give close support to both columns should the need arise and to provide the necessary air reconnaissance.

<sup>1</sup> Map 1.

<sup>2</sup> Map 2.





Flood water, irrigation canals and similar obstacles might be expected to hamper Kingstone's advance; it was estimated that three Iraqi infantry brigades and an artillery regiment might be between him and Baghdad; and the *Luftwaffe*, strength unknown, seemed bound to intervene. Very much depended upon the temper of the Iraqi troops. General Wavell had good reasons for calling this venture a gamble.

The presence of so much flood water on the main road west of Falluja made it necessary for the main body of Kingcol to reach the Euphrates bridge by negotiating Hammond's Bund. An improvised pontoon ferry worked in the gap, but only after three nights of harassing and exhausting work were the guns and heavy transport brought across. By the early morning of the 28th May when all was accomplished and the troops were ready to march Ferguson's column had crossed the Euphrates by the flying bridge at Sin ad Dhibban and disappeared into the desert. The Arab Legion had already ranged as far as the Tigris and cut the Baghdad-Mosul railway.

The main advance began half an hour before dawn on May 28th, in order to take advantage of the cool hours before the sun was up in strength. The armoured cars of the R.A.F. led the way, followed in order by the Household Cavalry squadron, the anti-tank guns with infantry escort, brigade headquarters and the field guns, with the Essex Regiment bringing up the rear. Nearly half the distance to Baghdad had been covered before the armoured cars encountered an Iraqi force entrenched astride the road at Khan Nuqta. Kingstone promptly brought his column to a halt and deployed the cavalymen for an attack on foot. But the defenders had no heart for the fight, and surrendered readily when our men approached with the bayonet, the brigadier urging on the advance in person. One officer and ninety-two other ranks were captured in this affair at what was really a fortified police post.

Finding that the telephone line to Baghdad was still intact an interpreter was instructed to transmit in Arabic a report containing grossly exaggerated estimates of our strength and to disclose the fact that we were advancing through the floods with numbers of tanks. The column, in fact, possessed no vehicle more formidable than Casano's cars. This experiment in creating alarm and despondency among the enemy had the hoped for result. It fluttered the already wavering spirits in Baghdad, where the leaders of the revolt were already looking anxiously over their shoulders towards the convenient proximity of the Persian frontier. Also, it persuaded them to send out a further detachment of troops to block our road.



The vanguard of the Iraqi 3rd Division came hastening out westwards along the desert highway from the city, and the two leading platoons were promptly assailed and scattered by the R.A.F. Our advance continued along a metalled road in bad condition. At some spots flood water could not be avoided. During the afternoon Iraqi artillery opened on the armoured cars, but our 25-pdrs. soon silenced this fire. At the end of the day a halt was called about twelve miles from Baghdad on the near side of a canal with Iraqi troops well entrenched upon the further bank. The bridge had been blown.

A report from Ferguson came in by wireless telephone. After a brush with enemy armoured cars at Taji a point had been reached on the railway three miles south-east of that town. Prisoners stated that this advance had come as a surprise: indeed, a train containing Iraqi troops from Baghdad had run into Taji station, and backed out again with all speed when Ferguson's men were seen to be in possession.

Next morning, the 29th May, Kingstone's guns were soon in action against Iraqi machine-gun posts beyond the canal, and R.A.F. bombers swooped down upon the enemy. When the Essex Regiment and a troop of the cavalry went in to attack on foot the opposition melted away, and by noon we were across the canal. The bridging equipment of the field squadron was hurried forward as, until our vehicles were able to make the passage, the advance could not continue. Enemy fighters had engaged our bombers, bomber escorts, and reconnaissance aircraft during the morning. The pilot of an Italian fighter which was shot down stated that he had flown from Rhodes on the previous day.

Ferguson's column had repelled a night attack delivered in armoured trucks and at dawn had driven the Iraqis from a position in the sandhills. Ferguson was now checked, only four miles from Baghdad, at sacred Al Kadhimain which might not be bombarded. Our scruples made artillery and rifle fire coming from the vicinity of the railway station difficult to subdue. Owing to flood water there appeared to be no way round.

At this time it appears that in and around Baghdad were some thirteen Iraqi battalions and five regiments of artillery, which against our hundreds of fighting men sounds fearful odds. But most of the units were much reduced by casualties and desertions, a number of guns had been captured or put out of action, and very many of the officers and men had 'no stomach to this fight'. Yet on this day Iraqi troops made an attack upon one of our convoys

returning from Habbaniya to H4 and five of the vehicles were lost.

On the 30th May, as soon as the bridge over the canal was ready, Brigadier Kingstone urged everyone forward to Baghdad. There were rumours that Rashid Ali had fled the capital, but Iraqi resistance was not quite at an end. When the armoured cars approached the Washash canal bridge which leads into the city they were checked by an anti-tank ditch and bursts of machine-gun fire. So the Household Cavalry were obliged to descend from their trucks and work forward under fire across the irrigated, partly flooded, land: a tedious progress, although our 25-pdrs. engaged the Iraqi machine-guns with some effect. Above the trees near the bridge could be seen the roof of the royal residence called 'The Palace of Roses', and away to the left, surmounting the green vegetation which fringed the waters of the Tigris, appeared the domes and minarets of Baghdad.

From this direction Iraqi guns began to shell the cavalry trucks and an artillery duel developed as the cavalymen scrambled forward from dyke to dyke. When dusk fell they were still a mile from the bridge in the centre although more progress had been made on the flanks.

From the military point of view it had proved a disappointing day. Neither column had succeeded in reaching the objective, for Ferguson was still faced with an *impasse* at Al Kadhimain. But while the troops in the field were facing the prospect of yet another day's fighting, Baghdad had taken matters into her own hands. Following a full-scale air attack upon the Army barracks by the R.A.F. that morning, during which the *Luftwaffe* made no sign, a deputation headed by the Lord Mayor of Baghdad, and a lieutenant-colonel representing the Army, had called at the British Embassy. They informed the Ambassador that Rashid Ali, accompanied by the officers of the Golden Square, Sherif Sharaf (the puppet Regent appointed by Rashid Ali), the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem and certain Germans and Italians had fled to Persia. The total number of this *émigré* party, it may be noted by those familiar with the tale of Ali Baba, amounted to precisely forty.

And here it may be said for the benefit of those readers still interested in the usurper that he did not stay long in Persia. By the beginning of August he had arrived in Turkey where the Government permitted him to reside so long as he kept out of mischief: that is to say refrained from political activities.

The Mayor of Baghdad announced that he had taken over the administration with a Committee of Internal Security and he



requested an armistice. Cornwallis promptly signalled this information to Jerusalem, whence it was relayed to General Clark at Habbaniya headquarters. Owing to a violent dust storm, however, it had proved impossible to get a message sent forward to Brigadier Kingstone until midnight.

## The End of the Matter

At six in the morning of May 31st an Iraqi deputation bearing a flag of truce appeared at the Iron Bridge. They were met by General Clark, Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac, and Major Glubb, whose profound knowledge of the Arab Moslem world proved most valuable. A car was sent to bring the Ambassador from Baghdad, and in the course of the day the following terms were drafted and later signed at the Embassy:

1. All hostilities between the two armies to cease forthwith.
2. The Iraqi army to retain its arms, equipment and munitions, but all units to proceed forthwith to their normal peace stations.
3. All British prisoners of war (military, R.A.F. and civilian) to be released forthwith.
4. All enemy (*i.e.* German and Italian) service personnel to be interned and their war material retained by the Iraqi Government, pending future instructions.
5. The town and vicinity of Ramadi to be evacuated by the Iraqi troops by noon on June 1st.
6. All Iraqi prisoners of war now in British hands to be handed over to the Regent as soon as the terms in paragraphs 3, 4 and 5 were complied with.

They were conciliatory and indeed honourable terms, for we had no wish to impose any penalty upon the Iraqi people, with whom we had not been officially at war. Our quarrel was solely with the faction of Rashid Ali who had first put themselves in the wrong with their own countrymen by their usurpation of power in April and then had forced us into an undesired campaign by their repudiation of the obligations of the treaty, their clearly displayed trend towards Germany, and their hostile military actions.

Little remains to be told. The Regent, who had been waiting at Habbaniya for the past ten days, re-entered his capital on June 1st. But the leaven of Axis intrigue and propaganda had worked all too effectively and a feeling of unrest was still strong in the cities. Serious

riots broke out in Baghdad that night, directed by the worst elements of the population, against the Jews, and about 700 persons lost their lives. Martial law was proclaimed and next day a new Government was established on a broad basis under Jamil Madfai as Prime Minister.

Jamil Madfai had come to Baghdad from Basra where he had begun to set up a more or less co-operative administration for southern Iraq. On the 27th May a detachment under Brigadier Powell made the first forward move from Basra, reaching next day Ur (the ancient Ur of the Chaldees) on the Euphrates, nearly a hundred miles upstream.<sup>1</sup> Resistance to this movement amounted to no more than a few shots, but conditions in southern Iraq did not favour a swift resumption of the march towards the capital. It was necessary to conciliate and reassure the desert tribes; to repair the road and the railway which had been damaged by saboteurs; to organize river transport; and to make landing-grounds for the use of our aircraft. At the end of May the terms of the armistice were made known—principally by leaflets dropped by the R.A.F.—to the Iraqi garrisons north of Ur. When these troops had carried out their obligations by departing for their peace stations at least one embarrassing element was removed.

More reinforcements were reaching Basra from India which soon completed the despatch of a second division. The first of the Basra troops ('Iraq Force') to arrive in Baghdad did so on June 12th when General Quinan's advanced headquarters were established there. The General was then in close touch with the Ambassador and 'able to ensure rapid and bold action in northern Iraq'.

Some such action had already been taken. It was of urgent importance that, after the conclusion of hostilities, British troops be seen in Mosul and Kirkuk, the region of the oilfields, so the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles were flown from Habbaniya to Mosul beginning on June 2nd. On the same day Kingcol despatched a small force of Household Cavalry, with a few guns and armoured cars, to the same destination. A few German pilots who had delayed their departure too long were captured at Mosul, and we discovered that a number of German aircraft had been grounded through lack of fuel. This was not altogether surprising as it had been estimated that in our various raids we had destroyed as much as a million gallons of petrol—a wasteful but well worth-while form of operation.

A small detachment of cavalry and armoured cars sent by Kingcol to Kirkuk encountered no trouble, but an attempt to bring to

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.



book our old enemy Fawzi Qawukji proved a rather exciting affair. A squadron of Household Cavalry with two guns was despatched from Habbaniya up the Euphrates, and when beyond Haditha, on June 9th, this detachment engaged a much superior force believed to be Fawzi's. During a running fight the enemy retreated across the Syrian frontier, and our little column, too weak to do more, remained in observation near Abu Kemal.

In mid-June the 10th Indian Division (Major-General W. J. Slim) relieved General Clark's troops in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and at other points in Iraq. Habforce was now wanted in Syria.

It had taken precisely one month to overcome the danger threatening from Iraq, and our success was a triumph for small numbers used with boldness and skill. The two remarkably successful actions of the Habbaniya garrison, won at a time of crisis by brilliant improvisation and unorthodox methods, tipped the balance in our favour; and the advance of Kingcol to Baghdad, against unknown odds and difficulties finally bore down the scale. The Indian Army, too, though less in the limelight, made an essential contribution at a time when excessive demands were already being made upon its manpower and its material resources. The prompt despatch of troops from India forced Rashid Ali's hand, gave protection to our oil supplies from southern Persia, and preserved the valuable base of Basra from anything worse than local disorder. Indian troops, too, assumed responsibility for Iraq after the Regent was restored and Wavell's small force was required elsewhere.

This is an Army story but some of the chief honours go to the Royal Air Force. The unconventional air attacks delivered from Habbaniya, with assistance from Shaibah, played the chief part in persuading the Iraqi forces to withdraw to the Falluja bridgehead; it was the air strike which enabled our troops to capture Falluja without the loss of a man; and valuable support was given to the troops who advanced on Baghdad. Assistance was given in the transportation of troops, and the Iraqi air force was practically destroyed by the bold and systematic action of the R.A.F.

To the Royal Navy we were indebted for the safe conduct of the succession of convoys from India to Basra where naval assistance proved essential in keeping the port and the Shatt al Arab open and safe for navigation. Naval aircraft also played their part.

Our losses were practically negligible—not appreciably higher than a hundred for the thirty days' campaign. The Iraqi troops, as was to be expected, suffered much more severely. The published

figures admitted to 497 killed, 686 wounded and 548 missing; but the recorded number of prisoners taken by us in action amounted to well over a thousand, while large numbers of desertions are known to have occurred.

It would seem that German intervention, in terms of the *Luftwaffe*, did not amount to more than sixty aircraft, half of them based on Syrian airfields and half on Mosul. Five bombers and eleven fighters were reported to have been destroyed. Dr. Grobba, the Nazi representative, was not impressed with the quality of Iraqi co-operation which distinguished itself in the first instance by shooting the unfortunate von Blomberg and then by providing a form of aviation spirit whose octane content was unsuitable for use by the Messerschmitts.

Even if there were not abundant evidence from other sources that Rashid Ali acted without the close co-operation of Berlin the scale of German support is sufficient to show that Hitler and the German High Command were unable to exploit the Iraq opportunity. As soon as he had established himself in power the usurper had requested military aid from Dr. Grobba, the Nazi representative. He was told that no assistance could yet be given on account of the necessity of first expelling the British from Greece. Later in May Rashid Ali again requested aid. He was informed that this could only be given in return for the turning over of the Baghdad railway to German control; and the permanent transfer to Germany of the Kirkuk oilfields and of all other Iraqi oilfields for the duration of the war. Rashid Ali himself had gone so far down the road to collaboration that he was prepared to accept even these terms; but the officers who composed the Golden Square refused to support him to this extent.

That Germany expected anything to come of these demands is open to doubt. She was unable to give Rashid Ali direct military assistance at the beginning of May; and though ready to stimulate any movement that threatened to embarrass Britain, she was sceptical, from the outset, of the usurper's chances. Later, the conquest of Crete proved so costly that Hitler was left with no desire to engage upon another airborne adventure further to the East.

And at this time the main pre-occupation of the Führer and his Generals was their coming invasion of Russia.

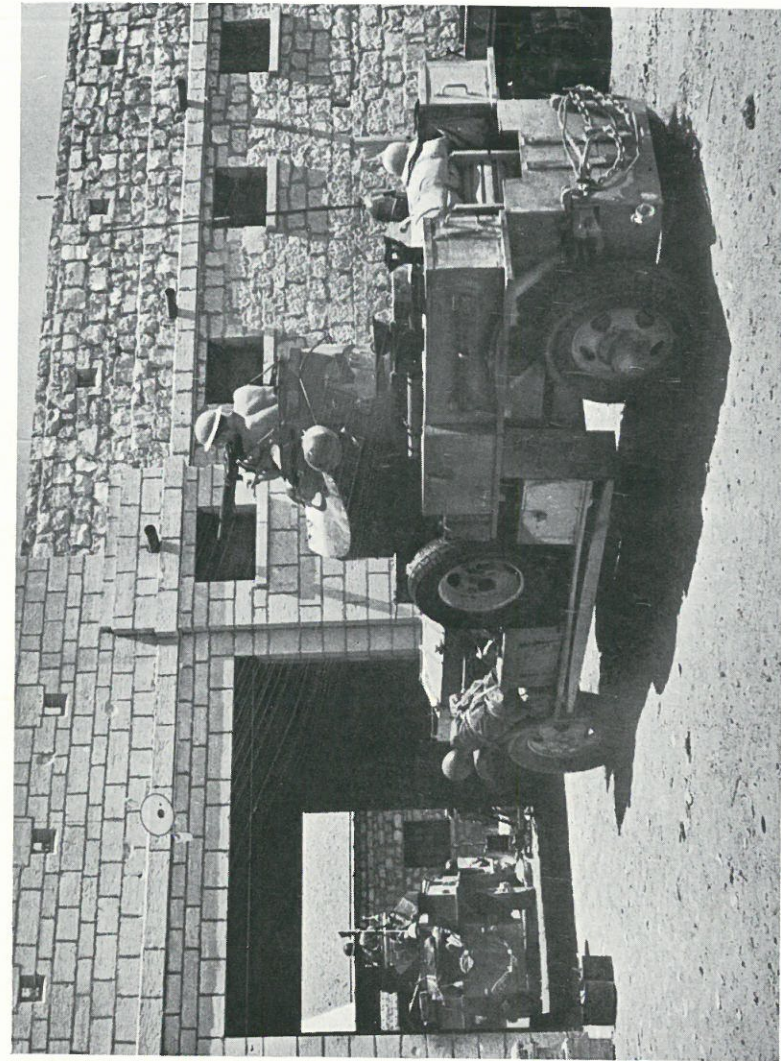
Naturally, when the fighting ended, the attitude of the Iraqi Army towards the British could hardly be described as cordial. But the passions and resentment which Rashid Ali and his friends and the Nazi agents and well-wishers had aroused among the Iraqi people gave place to a calmer mood. Iraq gradually returned to normal



conditions, with a Government who could be counted upon to honour their treaty obligations. The flow of oil through the pipeline from Kirkuk to Haifa was fully restored by the end of June.

One danger to the Middle East Command—the danger which threatened from the East—had been averted. Well that it should be so, for Wavell was already striving for possession of a territory to the North-East which could not be permitted to pass into hostile hands or even to remain in the hands of those who were not our friends. Most of what had been achieved in Iraq would be wasted unless this new trial of strength were brought to a successful issue.

Let us turn our attention to Syria.



R.A.F. ARMoured CARS AT RUTBA





ARAB LEGION

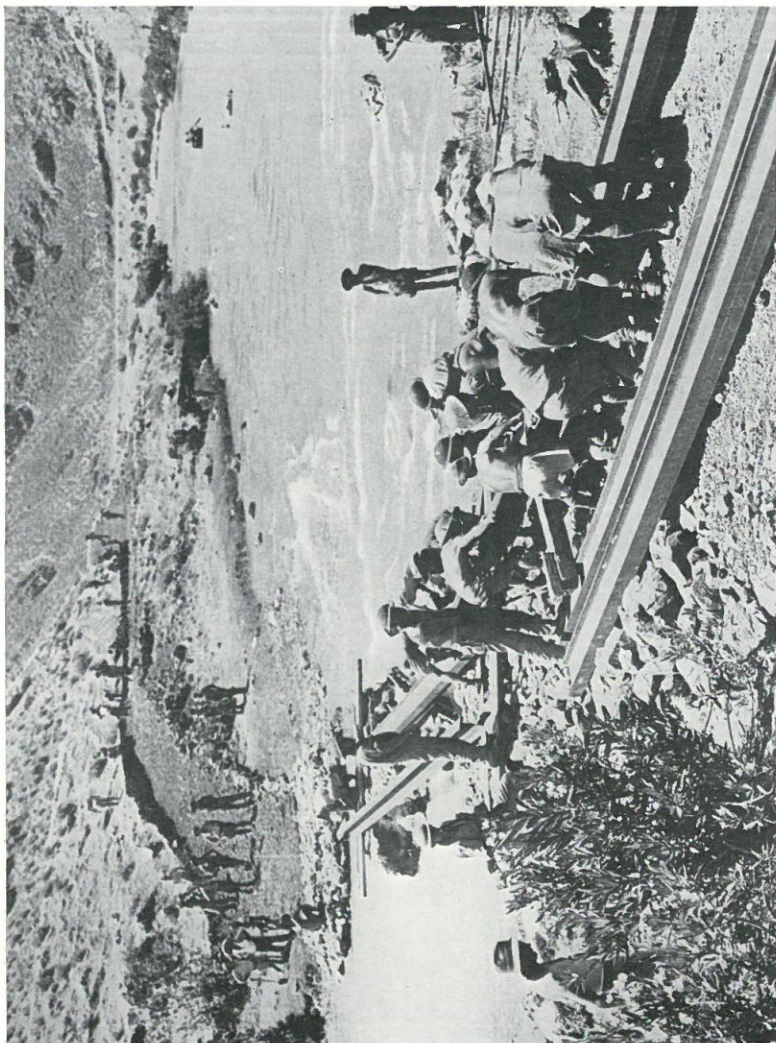
*Imperial War Museum*



PEACE AGAIN IN IRAQ: THE TIGRIS AT BAGHDAD

*Imperial War Museum*





*Imperial War Museum*

AUSTRALIAN SAPPERS BRIDGE THE LITANI

## SYRIA 1941



## CHAPTER I

# UNWANTED CAMPAIGN

### Needs Must Where the Nazi Drives

IN the Middle East lay two territories which might have aptly been symbolized by two question marks. Question marks, because of the incalculable rôle of the Power that continued to rule them. The one was French North Africa; the other was the French mandatory territory of Syria and the Lebanon.<sup>1</sup>

They had presented an enigma from the period—towards the end of June 1940—when it came to be realized in Britain that the French Empire, which remained intact and free from immediate danger of Nazi penetration, would for the most part, follow Vichy into the camp of surrender. We had hoped at first for better things.

Sooner or later, if the democratic cause were to prevail, it might be assumed that the victory of our armies in the Libyan desert would bring them to the frontiers of French Tunisia; sooner or later it might also be assumed that the need for countering Axis penetration or the need for establishing closer and more direct communications with Turkey would compel some forward move into Syria.

Syria, until 1918 a part of the Turkish Empire, had been placed under the mandate of France in 1920. Relations between the people of these provinces and the Mandatory Power had never been good and a direct clash had occurred in 1930 when for two days French artillery, at the command of General Sarrail, had shelled the sacred city of Damascus. In 1936 a treaty of friendship and alliance had been substituted for the mandate, but this treaty, ratified by the Syrian Parliament, still awaited the ratification of France.

Syria remained a military base, the main military base, for France in the Middle East. At the beginning of the War her Army of the Levant was about 120,000 strong. In conjunction with the British

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A. The single name Syria will normally be employed in this narrative, to include both Syria and the Lebanon.



forces under Wavell it had seemed possible that, assuming a continuance of the stalemate in the West, some form of offensive action might be initiated, either by way of Salonika and the Balkans into Central Europe or even into Caucasian Russia, should the pact between the two great Totalitarian Powers develop into a close military alliance.

The surrender of June 1940 naturally altered all this: France dropped out of the War, Syria was thereby neutralized, and the Army of the Levant began to melt away. Under the terms of the armistice with the Axis Powers the troops were progressively disarmed, demobilized and repatriated, only sufficient forces being left in the country to maintain internal order. These amounted to some 35,000 men.

From the very first the British Government had made their position clear. On July 1st, 1940, it was announced that we could not permit Syria to be occupied by a hostile force or to be used as a base for attacks upon the countries of the Middle East which we were pledged to defend.

Conforming to the policy of the Vichy Government, the French in Syria not only withdrew into a neutrality decidedly complaisant to the Axis but took such measures as they dared to prevent any accession of strength to our cause. It was with great difficulty that the Polish Brigade stationed in Syria succeeded in extricating itself and crossing the frontier into Palestine where it joined our forces. One Colonel de Larminat, escaping from arrest, also brought a small body of troops over with him. No more was possible in the way of open defection.

Meanwhile, the presence of the Italian armistice commission provided just that necessary maggot which could be relied upon to eat out the heart of the country in its own time. During the first few months there was no immediate danger. Germany faced West until at least the end of September and neither Germany nor Italy was yet in a position to take military action in the East. In consequence, General Wavell was under no necessity during these months to set aside any part of his limited strength for employment in the Syrian direction; and he discouraged any inclination on the part of the Free French to attempt a military adventure—a line of policy in which he was strengthened by the fiasco at Dakar in the early autumn of 1940. But that is another story.

Nevertheless, throughout these months German agents were increasing their influence in Syria. The busy von Hentig, head of the Oriental Department in the German Foreign Office, took charge in

January 1941 and began to organize the Arab youth upon Nazi lines, while keeping closely in touch with leaders of all the native political parties. An economic mission arrived, and of course, the inevitable mysterious 'technicians' who at this period of the war were wont to swell the staff of every German Embassy, Legation and Mission abroad, in addition to the 'tourists' whose enthusiasm for foreign travel always so conveniently anticipated the coming movements of the German armed forces.

Nevertheless, normal friendly relations were maintained between the British and French in this part of the world, and British and French consular officials continued to function in Syria and Palestine respectively. It was certainly no part of our war policy to weaken the hold of the French in this area. On the contrary, it was all to our interest that they should be strong enough to remain masters of their own house and able to put a check upon the stealthy infiltration of the Axis Powers.

The German drive through the Balkan peninsula brought the battle-front closer to Syria and the means which could be made available to counter a possible German air operation based upon the Dodecanese were under consideration as early as March 1941. With the loss of all the mainland of Greece and the outbreak of Rashid Ali's revolt in Iraq the danger grew more acute, more immediately urgent.

It was on May 2nd that the first clashes with Rashid Ali's forces took place in Iraq. A week later, the first German aircraft arrived on Syrian aerodromes *en route* for Iraq. As aircraft continued to arrive in the course of the next few days it became clear that German action and Vichy compliance were providing convenient staging facilities which would enable the Iraq rebellion more easily to be sustained, and, at the same time, establish an Axis grip upon Syria. Swift counter-action was necessary and on May 14th British aircraft bombed Palmyra. The first hostile action against Vichy-held Syria had been taken.

While it was the use of Syrian aerodromes by German aircraft that precipitated the British and Free French action against Syria in the month of June, the necessity for an operation of this nature had been urged by Generals de Gaulle and Catroux on behalf of the Free French some weeks earlier. In mid-April de Gaulle had warned the British Cabinet against any policy of concessions to Vichy, and had undertaken to submit a plan for an operation by Free French troops against Syria.

Now began an awkward triangular exchange of opinions, which



showed little signs of coinciding, between the Free French, the British War Cabinet and G.H.Q. Middle East, or more succinctly—de Gaulle, Churchill and Wavell.

General Dentz was now Vichy High Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief in Syria, and it was the original intention of London that he should be sounded with a view to discovering what action he would take in the event of attempted German penetration, and whether he would consider such action contrary to the terms of the armistice of the previous summer. Dentz, after a delay which was sufficient to dash any belief that he was disposed to welcome, let alone solicit, our co-operation, replied that 'he would consider any such action contrary to the terms of the German armistice and would resist accordingly', but he added—and here lay the rub—that he would obey whatever instructions he might receive from Vichy.

There then remained the question of whether it was desirable that we should ourselves take action to secure Syria against Axis penetration; and if so what should be the method of the action and what forces should be employed in the operation.

Both de Gaulle and Catroux were insistent that military action should be taken at the earliest date possible and that the spearhead of the operation should consist of the Free French forces in the Middle East. These now consisted of some six battalions organized as one division under the command of General Legentilhomme, formerly in command at Jibouti. The troops had seen a certain amount of active service in the Sudan and Eritrea in the course of the East Africa campaign and, having been subsequently stationed in Egypt, were now in the process of moving into Palestine. From the point of view of taking offensive action, they were short of supporting weapons (they had only one battery of guns and about twenty light tanks) and possessed very little transport.

Nor was the information at the disposal of the Free French in the Middle East by any means reliable. To take one example: on May 18th General Catroux personally informed Wavell that he had certain evidence that the French in Syria were withdrawing their forces into the Lebanon (*i.e.* out of the whole of the eastern part of the country into the comparatively narrow coastal strip), preparatory to handing over all the remainder to the Germans. For the moment, however, the road to Damascus was open, and he urged that we should seize the opportunity to march in and occupy Syria forthwith.

Wavell, having received very different information from his own sources, proved sceptical on this matter, and only three days later Catroux, who had gone to Palestine to meet a French officer from

Syria, cabled him to the effect that his own earlier information had been totally incorrect and that, so far from withdrawing into the Lebanon, the Vichy forces were moving troops into southern Syria and taking up positions south of Damascus with a view to defending the approaches to the city.

Meanwhile, General de Gaulle, at this time in West Africa, inquired why the Free French forces were not already on the march for Damascus.

In April, Mr. Churchill and his military advisers fully realized that German penetration of Syria must be regarded as a possible, perhaps imminent, development. Any hopes they had that General Dentz and the forces under his command might put up some resistance were dissipated by the outbreak in Iraq and the appearance of German aircraft on the landing-grounds of Syria. It was obvious that the participation of the *Luftwaffe* in the Iraq affair had only been made possible by the connivance of Vichy and that Syria might now become the Trojan horse by means of which the enemy might gain an entry into our Middle East citadel. As early as May 9th Churchill had emphasized to Wavell the necessity of forestalling the Germans in Syria, suggesting that if no other troops were available the Free French should be employed, though the final decision on the question of their use must rest with the British Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. The importance, indeed the necessity, of preventive action in Syria became constantly more apparent as May lengthened. The Prime Minister felt that risks must be taken to prevent the Germans 'picking up Syria with petty forces' but when the attack upon Crete opened on May 20th he was compelled to admit that we could not starve Crete for the sake of Syria and that the island battle claimed first priority.

Our patient and much-tried Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East was in the position of the father of a family whose budget cannot be stretched to cover all the needs of his numerous offspring. As the man who had to find the troops for any fresh campaign he was only too painfully aware of his limitations in man-power and war material. Ever since the preceding June his command had been primarily an affair of making ends meet with totally insufficient resources, and in the months of April and May it seemed as though all the bills were coming in together.

By reason of this weakness he had been reluctant to enter upon a campaign in Iraq and had favoured a settlement by conciliation. Now he viewed with extreme dubiety the prospect of yet another campaign for which he would, as usual, have to find the forces. When the Syrian



problem began to call for solution early in May he had just lost all the equipment and twenty-five per cent of the man-power of one force in Greece; a fresh and difficult campaign had opened in Iraq; an airborne attack upon Crete was to be expected; and he was committed to an early offensive in the Western Desert. He saw no prospect of the Free French being able, unaided, to bring Syria over to our cause, or of General Dentz resisting German infiltration. He advised against any approach to Dentz with regard to common action which might result in the necessity for a declaration of our strength, or rather our lack of strength.

Reluctant to undertake a movement into the country with insufficient forces, there seemed no prospect that his forces available could be other than insufficient. At the beginning of May he had in Palestine the 1st Cavalry Division which, as we have seen,<sup>1</sup> was called upon to provide 'Habforce' for the Iraq adventure. All that then remained of the division was a few regiments of horsed cavalry. Apart from the Free French troops he had nothing else fit to take the field, unless he drew upon the forces facing Rommel on the Egyptian frontier or the Palestine garrison troops who had their own tasks to perform.

There had been some hope that a friendly Turkey would lend assistance by occupying Aleppo if our forces should enter Syria; but such co-operation was hardly to be expected and was never secured. While in sympathy with our aims and ready to welcome a British military occupation which would bring us to her southern frontier, Turkey had a very understandable desire to avoid provocation of the Nazi aggressor. She would risk too much in doing so.

Meanwhile, the German infiltration by air proceeded at a tempo which was matched by the readiness of the Vichy authorities, both in France and Syria, to grant to France's former enemies every facility they might require to carry on the conflict against France's former ally.

Early in May General Huntziger, who had signed the armistice on behalf of France at Compiègne in the previous June and who now held the post of Minister for War under Pétain, informed General Dentz that the use of air bases in the Levant had been conceded to Germany and enquired whether the measure would lead to discontent among the troops in Syria.

Dentz replied that much discontent was likely to result and that he proposed to issue orders that any aircraft, whatever their nationality, which flew over Syria should be fired upon. This, however, was

<sup>1</sup> See 'Iraq', in this volume.

not at all in accordance with the Vichy conception of neutral behaviour, and Dentz was promptly instructed:

'In the case of German or Italian aircraft, refrain from retaliation. If some of these aircraft land on your aerodromes, receive them and ask for instructions. English aircraft must, on the other hand, be attacked by all possible means.'

A little later Dentz was instructed to place the airfield of Aleppo at the disposal of the Germans in order to facilitate the passage of their aircraft to Iraq and himself to despatch war material to Iraq to assist the rebellion. Both these orders were promptly carried out.

By the middle of May it was estimated that between sixty and seventy Axis bombers and fighters and about forty transport aircraft had made use of Syrian landing-grounds *en route* for Iraq, and had the revolt been sustained instead of petering out there is little doubt that the Germans would have arrived on a greatly increased scale, and no doubt at all that Vichy would have continued to provide all the co-operation required. This was rendered sufficiently clear by Pétain's broadcast on May 15th announcing a policy of closer collaboration with Hitler's Germany in Europe and Africa. Syria was not specifically mentioned, but facts were speaking for themselves.

The possibility of a fuller development of collaboration was hinted when Vichy instructed Dentz later in the month that he must be prepared to place the ports of Beirut, Tripoli and Latakia at the disposal of the Germans. Even Dentz seems to have demurred at this new instalment of collaboration and the demand was not pressed.

Then, while the R.A.F., following their original raid upon Palmyra on May 14th, continued almost daily attacks upon one or other of the aerodromes known to be harbouring Axis aircraft, a fresh development seemed to indicate that opposition to an occupying force might not be so serious after all. On the night of May 21st/22nd Colonel Collet, commander of a number of squadrons of Circassian cavalry in the frontier province of Hauran, crossed the border into Palestine and joined our forces with a considerable detachment of his men.

The sudden and unexpected arrival of these horsemen raised hopes that were not to be realized. Collet had been in touch with Catroux and the Free French for some little time previously, and his original intention was considerably more ambitious. He had first hoped to kidnap Dentz when the latter paid a visit to his headquarters, but the visit was cancelled. Later, information was received that General de Verdilhac, who had just arrived from France to take over the post of Deputy Commander-in-Chief, would inspect



Collet's troops on May 22nd. Collet, suspecting a plot to remove him from his command and to place him and those of his officers known to be in sympathy under arrest, also doubting whether he could restrain his officers any longer, decided to march his force over the border. Unfortunately the Free French radio broke the news prematurely, and loose talk in an N.C.O.'s mess helped to place the Vichy authorities on their guard. Collet was only able to bring seven of his ten squadrons with him. Moreover, he felt it necessary to give his followers the option of returning after they had crossed the frontier, and many of them did so.

It is open to question whether we were not, on the balance, losers rather than gainers as a result of Collet's high-spirited gesture. The few hundred men who remained with him were no great accession of strength, and their arrival helped to create a false impression regarding the possibility of further desertions if our troops actually crossed into Syria. And the alarm had been given. All troops in southern Syria were ordered to stand to arms, the garrison commanders in the frontier towns of the south-east were instructed to take special precautions, and de Verdilhac began to reinforce with three battalions the area of Deraa where the railway crosses the frontier due south of Damascus. To prevent further defections the Circassian troops and the locally recruited forces who were guarding the southern frontier were disarmed and replaced by Tunisians, Indo-Chinese and Senegalese, all of which were unlikely to prove susceptible to any appeal that might be made to idealism or to local nationalism. At the same time French officers believed to have leanings towards de Gaulle were relieved of their appointments.

These measures were a sufficient indication that, in the event of an invasion of Syria by our troops and those of the Free French, force would be met, at any rate at the outset, by force. Even Catroux now came round to the opinion that there was no longer any hope of the operation being carried through by the Free French forces unassisted.

Wavell, of course, was making preparations for the inevitable, calculating what risks might be run to provide sufficient forces, estimating the time he would need to concentrate them, considering plans for the advance into—or invasion of—Syria.

He selected the 7th Australian Division (Major-General J. D. Lavarack) which had been retained for the defence of Egypt but was minus one of its brigades now in Tobruk. The 4th Indian Division, after fighting with such distinction in Italian East Africa, was moving into Egypt and would contribute its 5th Brigade. An armoured-car

squadron of the Royal Dragoons and the cavalry regiment of the 6th Australian Division equipped with Bren carriers and obsolescent tanks were added. This, and a commando from Cyprus, was all that could be spared to supplement the Free French contingent and the remains of the 1st Cavalry Division already in Palestine.

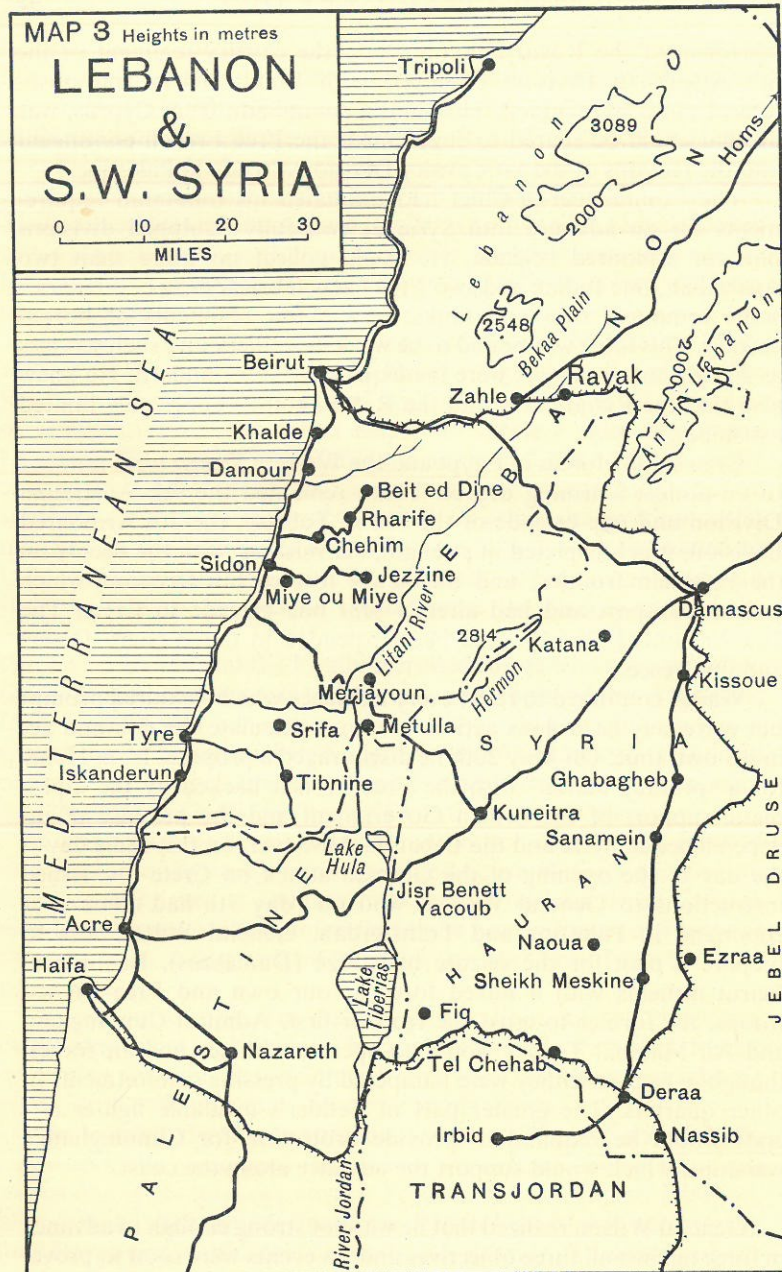
The Commander-in-Chief had estimated his minimum requirements for an advance into Syria at two fully equipped divisions plus an armoured brigade. He could collect no more than two Australian, one Indian and two Free French brigades; a commando; some armoured cars and tanks; and a few regiments of horsed cavalry. This force was bound to be weak in artillery and such services as signals and transport were inadequate by any standard. He knew also that the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. could supply only limited assistance.

Even so, the forces in Egypt and the Western Desert were reduced to an almost alarming degree. There remained the 9th Australian Division and one brigade of the 7th in Tobruk; the 7th Armoured Division, much depleted in strength, skirmishing with the enemy on the Egyptian frontier; and the newly formed 6th Division, which lacked transport and had already sent one brigade to Crete. The 2nd Armoured Division had been expended in the Western Desert and in Greece.

Wavell continued to resist every influence which favoured prompt but extremely hazardous action. He must calculate the risk and act in his own time. On May 20th he discouraged a proposal from Home for a 'probing action' with the Free French backed by the diplomatic support of the British Government and the promise of independence to Syria and the Lebanon. However, on this same day—the day of the opening of the German attack on Crete—he issued instructions to General Wilson, who on May 7th had taken over command in Palestine and Transjordan. General Wilson was to prepare a plan for the seizure of Mezze (Damascus), Rayak and Beirut airfields with a mixed force of our own and Free French troops, the former to cross the frontier first. Admiral Cunningham and Air-Marshal Tedder would co-operate with sea and air forces, though in each case they were hampered by pressing commitments in other quarters. The greater part of Tedder's available fighter aircraft would be required to provide protection for Cunningham's warships, which would support the advance along the coast.

General Wilson realized that he was not strong enough to advance in force against all three objectives and, as events were soon to prove,





he was nowhere too strong and everywhere too weak. Although the Commander-in-Chief attached great importance to the capture of Mezze aerodrome near Damascus, the advance to the city would be over open country suitable for the action of armoured fighting vehicles in which the Vichy French were known to be much superior. Moreover, the occupation of Damascus would not, in itself, be decisive. On the other hand the approaches to Rayak and to Beirut both lay through mountains and defiles, but Beirut was the seat of Government and the headquarters of General Dentz. Here the natural difficulties confronting an advance might well lead Vichy to expect our main effort elsewhere; so Wilson relied very much upon the coastal advance which would have the support of naval bombardment on the left flank and, on the right, be in touch with the movement against Rayak.

He issued detailed orders only for this opening phase of the operations. If Damascus, Rayak and Beirut were occupied speedily resistance might collapse: if not fresh dispositions would be necessary, but it was intended that the coastal advance should be continued to Tripoli.

For the thrust against Rayak and Beirut Major-General Lavarack had at his disposal his own 7th Australian Division (two brigades and divisional troops) and certain additional units which provided him with tanks, armoured cars and horsed cavalry. By sending forward special mobile columns he hoped to achieve the utmost penetration at the outset.

His sector extended from the river Jordan to the coast and so included the two main routes leading northward into the Lebanon from Palestine. One road runs up the tongue of land formed by the Palestine border which it crosses at Metulla to continue through the hills to Zahle and Rayak and the Bekaa plain.<sup>1</sup> This road, which is good as far as Merjayoun but then enters the narrow gorge of the Litani river, was allotted by Lavarack to the 25th Australian Brigade (Brigadier A. R. B. Cox) with its complement of tanks, armoured cars and horsed cavalry.

The main route into the Lebanon is, of course, the coastal road running direct to Beirut.<sup>2</sup> From the tunnelled headland at the frontier this road is dominated almost throughout by the outliers of the Lebanon range. These hills rise abruptly from a flat littoral strip nowhere more than 2,000 yards wide, and in places the cliff face is so close that the road is easily blocked by a simple demolition.

<sup>1</sup> Map 5.

<sup>2</sup> At this time the coastal railway ended on the Palestine side of the frontier.



Away from the road the mountainous country—steep slopes, tree-clad or boulder-strewn, falling to deep gullies—is difficult to traverse even on foot. The 21st Australian Brigade (Brigadier J. E. S. Stevens) and attached troops, forming the main column, was to press forward by the coastal road, making with all speed for Beirut. The approaches to this route were to be improved by connecting up at three points a lateral road on the Palestine side with a similar road beyond the frontier. These ‘bridgeheads’ would also secure the use of a track through the mountains which led into the town of Tyre from the east.

The standing tasks of the Royal Navy were to protect the coastal advance from interference from the French warships based on Beirut and to give support by bombarding Vichy defences and gun positions. Also, the Navy was to put ashore the commando (C Battalion, Special Service Brigade commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R. N. R. Pedder) on the northern bank of the Litani river, about sixteen miles from the frontier, at sunrise on the opening day of the advance. The commando was, if possible, to prevent the destruction of the river bridge and hold it until the arrival of the Australians from the south.

Whereas the Australian columns might be able to arrange some measure of mutual support, the advance from Transjordan into the Hauran and on to Damascus, to be undertaken by the 5th Indian Brigade Group (Brigadier W. L. Lloyd) and the Free French (General Legentilhomme), was in the nature of an independent operation. It was to pass eastward of the Mount Hermon *massif* which is a continuation of the Anti-Lebanon range. The initial movement would be faced with no great natural difficulties, for the roads are good and dispersal across the stony desert promised to be easy. The only high ground of importance overlooks Deraa from the south.

The 5th Indian Brigade aimed to secure intact the railway east of the Jordan as far as Deraa and then to establish a defensive flank Deraa–Sheikh Meskine–Ezraa in order to protect our forward communications from attack by Vichy forces in the Jebel Druse when the French took up the advance on Damascus. Flank protection on the left would be provided by *Groupeement Collet* consisting of the Circassian squadrons, a squadron of Spahis in trucks, a collection of light tanks and armoured cars, and only two guns. This column would move on Fiq. Further still to the west the 1st Royal Fusiliers (less one company) of the 5th Indian Brigade with the 9th Australian Field Battery would cross the Jordan at Jisr Benett Yacoub (‘the bridge of Jacob’s daughters’) and secure Kuneitra, thirteen miles beyond on the Damascus road.

The Vichy forces, which totalled about 35,000 men, comprised eighteen battalions of Colonial, Senegalese and Foreign Legion infantry, eleven of *troupes spéciales* (locally recruited Syrians, Lebanese and Circassians), and twenty squadrons of cavalry. The artillery amounted to 120 guns, there were more than ninety tanks, and the sixty available aircraft were to be considerably reinforced during the campaign which ensued.

About 8,000 of the forces mentioned above were Frenchmen. More will presently be said of the attitude of the French officer, but it was to be assumed that the rank and file of the Colonials, Senegalese and Foreign Legion would fight for the Government who paid them without much thought for the political issues involved. The local levies might well prove a more uncertain and less resolute factor.

To guard the approaches to Beirut there appeared to be three main defensive positions. The first was along the Litani river where a system of concrete strongpoints and gun emplacements, well sited and camouflaged, had been installed. The second position, about fifteen miles further north, covered the town of Sidon: here artillery fire from the hills above Sidon might hope to deny us the use of the lateral road which runs south-eastward from the coast to Merjayoun. The third and final line was at Damour, barely a dozen miles south of Beirut, where the river which enters the sea is narrower and carries a smaller volume of water than the Litani; but on the northern side the ground is steep and rocky and offers every advantage to the defence.

To bar the way to the Bekaa plain and Rayak General Dentz—or rather General de Verdilhac who commanded in the field—had concentrated considerable forces in the region of Khiam and Merjayoun.

Damascus we were likely to find easier of access, for the city was the focal point of many roads and caravan tracks centuries old. Though resistance might be offered at many points beyond the Transjordan frontier, Kissoué, about eight miles south of the Syrian capital, provided a strong defensive position. Here a semi-circle of rocky ridges, falling steeply towards the south, commanded the two principal roads.

It was with no great confidence that Wavell and Wilson contemplated the task before them. The best that one could hope for was an unopposed entry into Syria. This was unlikely in the extreme, but there seemed some chance that a token resistance would cease as soon as we had made our intentions clear. In order to provide the

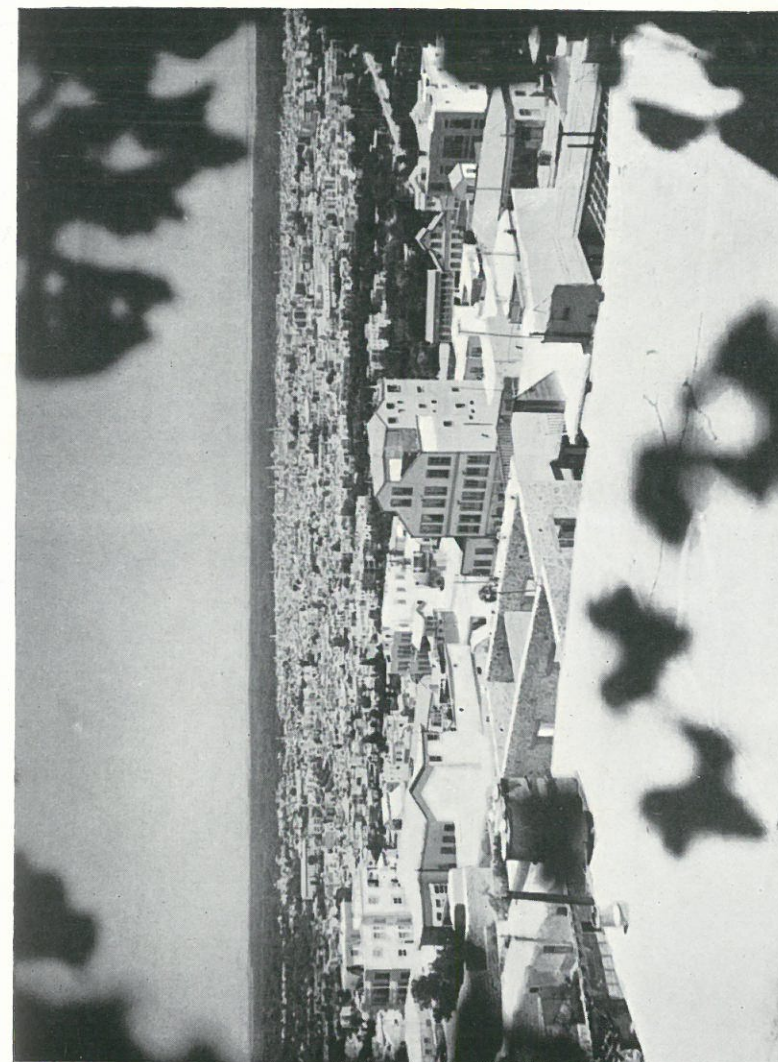


Vichy forces with every opportunity for co-operation or submission, our advance was to be preceded with a shower of airborne leaflets; French-speaking officers were to accompany all leading units and advance under cover of the white flag to summon the Vichy forward posts to surrender to the cause of de Gaulle 'and then to wait for the miracle to happen'.

As a further attempt to indicate the peaceful intent of our invasion the Australians were under orders to wear their felt hats in place of their steel helmets until such time as they were actually fired upon—a decision which was regarded with something like cynical amusement by the troops concerned.

This well-meant intention to extend the olive branch before throwing the hand-grenade was destined to meet with singularly little result. Talk of our pacific intentions invited easy exploitation of the theme of the hypocritical Anglo-Saxon. Generals Dentz and de Verdilhac were well aware that an invasion was pending, which was not surprising, considering that it had been the subject of endless speculation throughout the Middle East for weeks past. They possessed a fairly accurate estimate of the strength, composition and probable reinforcement of General Wilson's command and they could make a shrewd guess both at the date of our invasion and at the methods we were likely to adopt. Our inevitable decision to employ the Free French, certainly served to stiffen and embitter the opposition of Vichy. Throughout the campaign the Vichy forces reserved their fiercest and most unrelenting animosity for their compatriots. It must be remembered that at this time many Frenchmen regarded de Gaulle and his following as nothing but a dissident and traitorous faction which, by breaking away from the decision of the Government and by maintaining what was still regarded as a hopeless struggle alongside the traditionally pig-headed English, were jeopardizing France's prospects of eventually obtaining tolerable terms of peace.

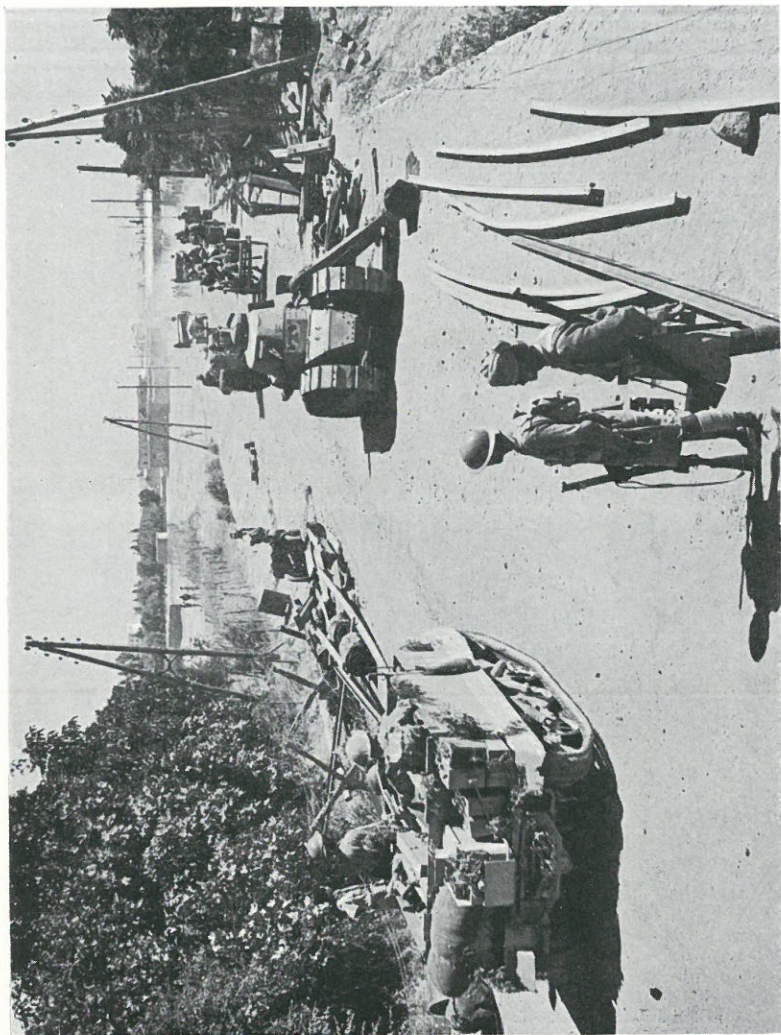
Little room was left, during these last days, for doubting the attitude of official France. On June 3rd a spokesman of Vichy announced that Syria and Tunisia would be defended single-handed against a British attack. Berlin found a convenient formula for ensuring French resistance; an official statement, while indicating that a British attack upon Syria would be treated as a purely Anglo-French matter, announced that 'full co-operation' would be extended to France under these circumstances. This of course might mean anything or nothing; in fact, it left a loophole for Germany either to intervene on exactly the scale she saw fit and found possible or to



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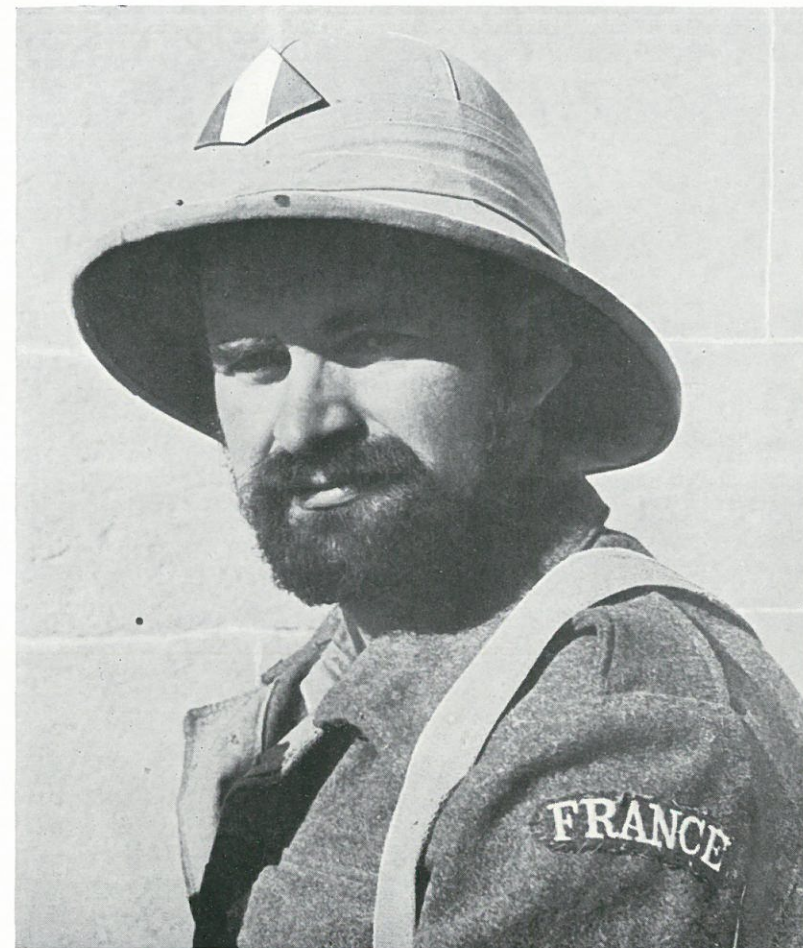
DAMASCUS





*Imperial War Museum*

INDIAN TROOPS NEAR DAMASCUS



*Imperial War Museum*

FREE FRENCH



content herself with purely platonic gestures of sympathy. Admiral Darlan proclaimed that Germany was naturally prepared to allow France the most sacred of all national rights—that of defending her Empire.

Finally, on June 6th the official military spokesman of Vichy stated that fighting might be expected to break out in Syria at any time and that the defences of the provinces had been put in readiness 'since it appears that Britain has decided to move in'.

De Verdilhac had summed up the situation. He knew that, failing German aid, a prolonged resistance to the invasion could scarcely be maintained; also that German aid on any significant scale was hardly to be expected. Nevertheless, as was subsequently revealed, he was determined to do all in his power to retain Syria for Vichy.

And so, while the aerodromes and the northern ports of Syria stood ready to welcome any force that might appear under the sign of the Swastika, the French troops were concentrated in the southern part of the country to give battle to their fellow-countrymen and to their former British allies as soon as the frontier was crossed.

For us, therefore, the prospect was unpleasing in the extreme, yet it is difficult to see how we could have conducted the affair other than we did. The attempt at a 'conciliatory invasion' had to be made even though it were fore-doomed to failure. Wavell himself warned the Cabinet that the whole enterprise might founder if the French resisted firmly.

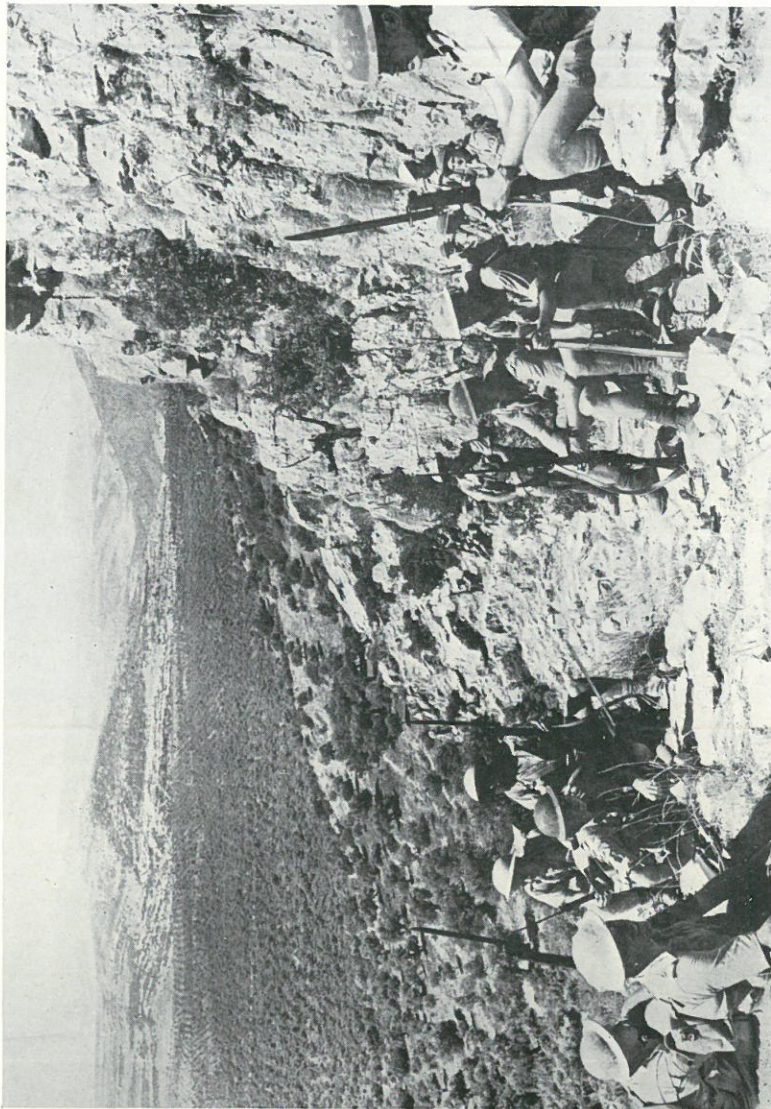
Sunday, June 8th, selected for our advance into Syria, represented the earliest possible day for the operation in the judgment of General Wavell who had resisted every pressure brought to bear on him for earlier action which could only have been taken with even smaller forces and little forethought or preparation.

It was known that numbers of the French officers were in the habit of spending week-end leave in the congenial surroundings of Beirut and Damascus; but in view of the state of *alerte* which already existed upon the Vichy side of the frontier it is unlikely that any such liberties were being taken by officers of the southern garrisons on this particular occasion.

As soon as the first of our troops had crossed the frontier Middle East Command announced by radio that combined British and Free French forces would enter Syria with a view to eliminating enemy influence in that country. This evoked a counterblast from Vichy, which denied any collaboration with the Germans in Syria, protested at our action and warned us that the invasion would be resisted.

Addressing the people of Syria and the Lebanon by radio and

F.V.—5



LEBANON LANDSCAPE

Imperial War Museum



leaflet General Catroux, in the name of General de Gaulle as representing Free France, announced, 'I come to put an end to the mandatory régime and to proclaim you free and independent'. With this assurance His Majesty's Government were associated by a statement issued by Sir Miles Lampson, British Ambassador to Egypt.

## Across the Frontier

FIRST into Vichy territory were a party of forty-two Australians which started across country an hour before midnight on Saturday. This party had orders to prevent the demolition of the coastal road at a point where it was bounded by a steep cliff-face near the village of Iskanderun. As it happened the Australians were directed to the wrong place and found themselves well to the north of the spot where the road had been mined. Yet the surprise was complete and the Vichy troops encountered fared badly indeed. Some fifty of them were killed or captured, and two armoured cars, a number of other vehicles, some machine guns and anti-tank guns, and thirty-one horses were taken by the Australians at and near Iskanderun.

Soon after 2 a.m. on June 8th, in bright moonlight, the main advance was made—Australians by the coastal road and through the hills inland towards the Litani river; Australians again towards Merjayoun; Indians and British, Arabs and Free French across the more open country which was the way to Damascus.

The 2/14th Australian Battalion started along the coastal road, but almost immediately the road was blown some distance ahead. This demolition caused a halt, for no vehicles could negotiate it; but soon the infantry pushed forward on foot and presently came up with the party established near Iskanderun. The advance continued northward, meeting with no opposition, in the direction of Tyre.

The city where once King Solomon purchased timber for the building of his temple and which later endured an eight-month siege from Alexander the Great had already been reached by another Australian column working towards the sea across the hills from the south-east. A mixed force, known as 'Doncol' from the name of its commander Lieutenant-Colonel A. B. MacDonald and composed of the 2/16th Australian Battalion with the Cheshire Yeomanry and supporting arms, had crossed the frontier and established posts on the lateral road that runs parallel to it on the Syrian side. After rounding up a few French African troops and skirmishing with a

squadron of Spahis which soon disappeared, Doncol pushed on by a road through the hills to Tibnine nearly ten miles beyond the frontier. The mayor of this little town provided one of the few instances of really effective co-operation on the part of the civil authorities during the advance. He kindly undertook to telephone to Tyre, the next objective of the column, and find out whether the invaders would be welcome.

The answer was in the affirmative, and the column pressed ahead. It had to brush aside small attempts at resistance on the way, but early in the afternoon the Australians were looking down from the hills upon the promontory where Tyre, grey-roofed like a Cornish fishing village and with sailing boats lying off shore, basked peacefully in the warm June sunshine.

Leaving the main body of the 21st Australian Brigade, advancing from the south, to occupy the town, Doncol pushed straight on up the coast until it reached a road-block south of the Litani river. Here the leading troops came under fire from hidden infantry and guns covering the approaches to the river crossing and were brought to a halt. This represented the greatest advance made by any part of the Australian Division in the course of the day, for they were now nearly eighteen miles beyond the frontier. Further inland, on their right, horsed cavalry of the Cheshire Yeomanry had turned north from Tibnine through extremely difficult country where the going was necessarily slow and had reached the village of Srifa, which looks towards the middle reaches of the Litani, without having made contact with any part of the Vichy forces, which now it is safe to call the 'enemy'.

Good progress had been made, but the Australians had not yet clashed with the main opposition. The test was to come on the morrow when the invaders approached the river line. Here there had been a disappointment. The commando, 480 strong, which was to have seized and held a bridgehead beyond the river had not been landed. It had duly sailed from Port Said at noon on the previous day in H.M.S. *Glengyle* with a destroyer escort but, arriving off the mouth of the Litani about half an hour after midnight, it had found so heavy a surf running that, in the expert opinion of the Navy, it would have been impossible for the boats to make a landing. Colonel Pedder, despite his anxiety to keep the rendezvous with the Australians at the river crossing, was obliged to defer to naval opinion, and the convoy accordingly returned to Port Said with a view to returning upon the following night. Fire had been opened by the French shore batteries and returned by two of our destroyers,



so the prospects of achieving surprise when the operation was repeated were not great.

The Australian right column (25th Brigade), with Rayak as its objective, duly crossed the frontier in the vicinity of Metulla and advanced on Merjayoun. By the first light of morning Brigadier Cox began to clear his right flank, an operation which seemed to promise no particular difficulty. The 2/33rd Battalion secured certain small villages in the foothills of Mount Hermon and one company, in its distinctive headgear, turned northward off the Kuneitra road and 'all day without seeing a Frenchman, marched into Syria over the rock-strewn hills'. Further west, however, the battalion was checked at the hill fort of Khiam<sup>1</sup> which covered the village of the same name lying on the spur behind it. Some Australians broke into the fort, but were withdrawn when it was found that the accurate fire of mortars and field guns made reinforcement impossible.

The main advance met with a decided rebuff. As the men of the 2/31st Battalion filed along the hillside road towards Merjayoun they were greeted with a spatter of machine-gun fire from the village of Khirbe, some distance beyond the frontier. Here, as elsewhere, a Free French officer was sent ahead to parley under a white flag. Here, as elsewhere, the request that the Vichy garrison should rally to our side or at least allow our forces to pass without interference was contemptuously rejected. Here, as elsewhere, the bearer of the flag of truce was fired upon by the Vichy troops as he returned.

Thereafter, the defenders of the village opened a brisk fire, and as the mortar shells began to burst with disturbing accuracy among our deployed infantry an attempt was made to rush the village with the three cavalry tanks which supported the column. Two of the three tanks were speedily knocked out and the attack was abandoned, the infantry withdrawing about noon out of range of the French mortars. A correspondent present with the troops in this sector wrote somewhat optimistically that evening: 'It is not yet certain whether this is just token shooting or not.' The troops held the opposite view which they expressed after their own fashion.

On the left flank a squadron of Cheshire Yeomanry had pushed up into the hills towards a bridge over the Litani river south-west of Merjayoun.

The advance of Brigadier Lloyd's 5th Indian Brigade, which was to open the way to Damascus, met with no opposition at the actual

<sup>1</sup> Map 5.

frontier. The two Indian battalions advanced from the Irbid area at zero hour. Acting with them were the horsemen of the Trans-jordan Frontier Force whose nerve was not equal to a silent advance upon the bridge at Nassib: they opened fire in the dark at a range of 400 yards, whereupon the Vichy defenders blew up the bridge.

More important was it to secure intact the well guarded viaduct at Tel Chehab, just beyond the frontier, and this was accomplished by the Rajputana Rifles. Captain A. Murray and Havildar Goru Ram wiped out with their Tommy guns the Vichy post in the ravine below, and at the sound of the firing a platoon rushed the two posts on the viaduct above.

The two Indian battalions—3/1st Punjab Regiment and 4/6th Rajputana Rifles—had now to secure Deraa. Both approached from the west, the 3/1st Punjab passing to the south and the Rajputana Rifles to the north of the town in order to isolate it and compel its surrender.

Brigadier Lloyd was with the southern column which occupied the high ground south of Deraa before 5 a.m. At dawn the customary procedure was followed. A staff car flying a flag of truce began to drive up the road towards the town, and the Vichy guns promptly opened fire. The car was hit, but the three officers got out and continued undaunted on foot towards the town. But it was of no avail. The French commander expressed his intention of defending his position.

It was the guns of the 1st Field Regiment which brought a speedy end to this affair. When, after a short bombardment, three Punjab companies advanced resistance ended and Deraa was ours for the loss of sixteen wounded. The Rajputana Rifles, turning south astride the railway, arrived when all was over; but they had engaged a troop train, shot up Vichy transport, and captured four armoured cars. This battalion now moved northward towards Sheikh Meskine, being harassed on the way by Vichy cars and still more by hostile aircraft. A frontal attack against the town, delivered at 3 p.m., over flat ground exposed to machine-gun fire, did not succeed; but high ground to the west was occupied in readiness for another attempt next day.

Colonel Collet's Circassian cavalry with a squadron of lorry-borne Spahis and a dozen light tanks had moved forward on the eastern side of Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee) to cover the left flank of the two Indian battalions. They had crossed the frontier just before dawn and breasted the hill slopes to reach the small town of Fiq which was occupied without incident. The column moved on



northward and then eastward, reaching and occupying the village of Naoua before the end of the day. At Naoua there were signs that resistance might be offered, but on being informed that large tank reinforcements were on the way the Vichy commander promptly surrendered. *Groupement Collet* bivouacked that night near Sheikh Meskine in contact with the Rajputana Rifles, having covered between forty and fifty miles and encountered no opposition.

Further still to the left the remaining battalion of Brigadier Lloyd's brigade, the 1st Royal Fusiliers, had crossed the upper waters of the Jordan at the picturesquely-named Bridge of Jacob's Daughters (Jisr Benett Yacoub). The Fusiliers moved by the route which Australian cavalry had taken in Allenby's victorious sweep nearly a quarter of a century before, and apart from a series of undefended road-blocks met with no opposition until they approached the town of Kuneitra at about 10.30 a.m. Having stormed a solidly constructed road-block which extended some distance into the fields on either side of the route and was defended by Senegalese troops, an officer was sent forward to demand the surrender of the town.

After being detained for over two hours the emissary returned, accompanied by some French officers who professed themselves anxious to 'explain the position'. These men had a strange story to tell. They asserted that they had received an official report from Headquarters in Damascus that Germany had begun an attack upon Russia and that since the whole situation had therefore radically changed it was likely that France would be fighting by the side of England once more.

We were naturally unable to confirm this report, for it was Sunday, June 8th, not Sunday, June 22nd. Accordingly the deputation somewhat regretfully withdrew. When the Fusiliers delivered their attack in the mid-afternoon, supported by fire from the 25-pdrs. that accompanied the column, resistance proved greater than had been anticipated and they were unable to force their way into the town.

As for the main body of the Free French, the leading brigade group was moving forward in hired buses and lorries to Irbid and Deraa. The rear echelon, lacking motor transport of any kind, was on its way up through Palestine by train.

Our air offensive, carried out by the few squadrons available, was not on this day impressive, although the airfields at Rayak and Mezze were bombed and machine-gunned and the oil-storage tanks at Beirut were attacked. The R.A.F. took its part in the policy of hold-

ing out the olive-branch by scattering leaflets containing explanations of our presence in Syria.

The Navy had been in action against a quite aggressive enemy but the only loss was to the Fleet Air Arm, two Fulmars being shot down and others damaged by Vichy fighters.

In his report to the Commander-in-Chief General Wilson called what had been accomplished on June 8th 'a good day's work', but we were not yet at grips with the main forces of the enemy, and hard fighting was to be expected rather than a Vichy collapse.

It is easier now than it was at the time to appreciate the reasons for the tenacity and bitterness of French resistance. We had overestimated the number of Germans actually in Syria at the moment of our invasion—a miscalculation which in no way removes either the military or the moral justification for our act—and, believing that Axis military and air units were established in some strength, we were incredulous when prisoners informed us that they knew of the presence of no Germans apart from a very few who had made temporary landings on the eastern airfields in the course of the Iraq campaign.

In fact, no sooner had our forces crossed the frontier than the Axis acted with intelligent promptitude. Realizing that the few hundred 'technicians', 'tourists' and 'advisers' could constitute no serious resistance to our progress and that they were in no position to aid their Vichy satellites with airborne or seaborne forces, they virtually wrote off Syria from the start. The ground staffs on the airfields were speedily flown back to Europe or evacuated by train through Turkey. Some hundreds of Germans and Italians passed westwards through Ankara in the course of the next few days.

It was a wise decision. To Hitler, with his attention now concentrated upon the imminent campaign against Soviet Russia, the Syrian affair must have seemed of minor importance. Such German intervention as was possible at this juncture might do more harm than good, by causing wholesale Vichy desertions to the Free French and British. German policy, accordingly, while expressing official sympathy with Vichy as the victim of characteristic British aggression, was careful not to implement this sympathy in any practical way.

And so the French resistance was based, at least in part, upon a genuinely sincere belief among the troops that they were defending their territory against aggression and that there had been no danger of or from German infiltration. This belief was fortified by a proclamation issued on the day of invasion by Marshal Pétain who



accused the British, and the Frenchmen 'fighting under a dissident flag', of wilfully attacking their former allies and their compatriots.

This was one reason for the French resistance. A second lay in the professional pride of the French officers. Many of them knew little of European affairs. Their outlook narrowed by a long sojourn in the French colonial possessions, they had no special feeling of animosity against the Nazi doctrine. Schusnigg and Benes, Roosevelt and Churchill meant little or nothing to them, and they were certain where their duty lay. It was to fight for the pride of the French Army, a pride which had been so inexplicably humbled during the terrible days of May and June 1940. Did the British think that French prestige had sunk so low that the Army of the Levant would surrender without a fight to three brigades and a handful of rebels?

## CHAPTER II

### A WEEK'S PROGRESS

#### Litani River: On to Sidon

ON the afternoon of June 8th the commando had sailed from Port Said once more to make their attempt against the coast immediately north of the Litani river mouth. Now that the advance had actually begun their chances were, of course, very much diminished. The Vichy troops would be fully on the alert, particularly as the Australian vanguard had, by sundown, pushed close up towards the river from the south. Colonel Pedder, the commander of the expedition, had received information that two battalions of French Colonial troops were now established in concrete pillboxes on the ridge to the north of the river, and that the bridge, as was to be expected, had been demolished.

It seemed a grim prospect, but Colonel Pedder hoped that he might be able to rush the blockhouses and hold them, or at least keep the enemy thoroughly engaged, until such time as the Australians, having passed the river, arrived to take the pressure off his troops and continue the advance in the direction of Sidon. In the meantime he was likely to be fighting at a decided disadvantage, heavily outnumbered.

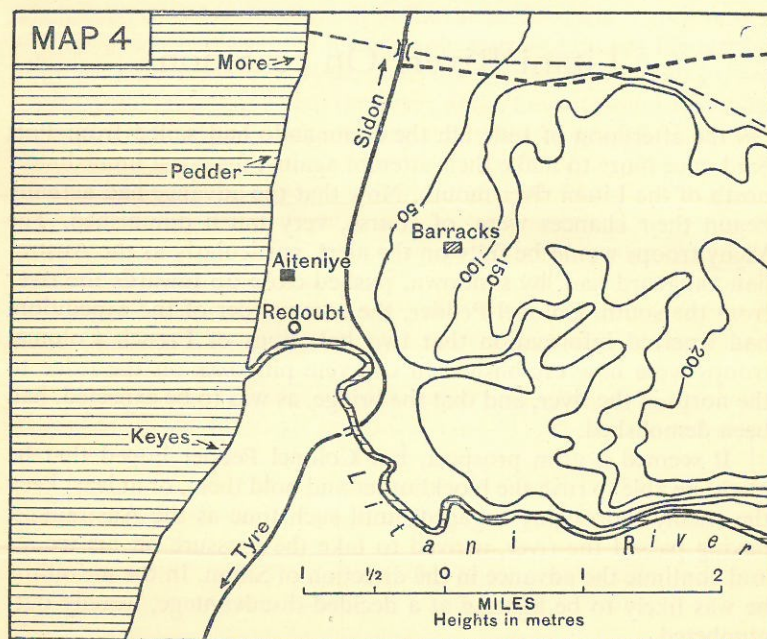
He divided his commando into three groups. Major G. C. T. Keyes with three troops (eight officers and 136 other ranks) would deliver the main attack against the barracks on the hillside above the village of Aiteniye. A diversionary attack would be made by two troops (five officers and ninety other ranks) under Captain G. R. M. H. More, who would land further to the north and aim at cutting off the position from that direction. Colonel Pedder himself with the remaining three troops (seven officers and 135 men) would form the reserve to be plugged in according to the way in which the operation developed.

By the light of the full moon H.M.S. *Glengyle* once more approached the mouth of the Litani. It was nearing 4 a.m. on the 9th



when the landing-craft were lowered into a calm sea and made straight for the shore to take what advantage they could of the brief half-light before sunrise threw all their movements into brilliant relief for the benefit of the defenders comfortably established on the hillside above.

Unfortunately the broad mouth of the Litani was obscured by a sandbank and Keyes's detachment, which should have formed the



spearhead of the assault, was put ashore on the southern bank of the river, a full half-mile from the mouth. This proved most unfortunate. It meant that they would have to force a crossing to the northern bank and even if they succeeded in doing so, all hope of surprising the Vichy troops in the barracks was at an end.

However, in the face of this misfortune, which seemed fatal to the whole plan, Keyes pushed ahead, passing through the leading company of the 2/16th Australians. He had got his men ashore about 5 a.m. and they soon reached the river, coming under field-gun, mortar and machine-gun fire from a ridge away to the north-east. Even though two Vichy destroyers joined in for a time, they remained

in their position on the river bank for four long hours. Then, under cover of the fire of the Australian 25-pdrs. some of the Australians carried forward a boat which had been discovered and, by this means, men of the commando and a number of Australians made the crossing. In front of them was a redoubt manned by about forty of the enemy.

With the twenty men that remained of his force Keyes succeeded in rushing the redoubt about midday and capturing thirty-five prisoners inside it. To some extent the tables were now turned, for he was able to bring a captured gun into action and under cover of its fire the remainder of his three troops in small groups gradually succeeded in crossing the river. By evening they and the Australians had made some sort of bridgehead, although the actual passage of the river was still a precarious business.

Each of the other two groups had had its own tribulations during that day of bitter fighting. Pedder, early realizing that Keyes's landing had miscarried, promptly landed with his own three troops north of the river, very much in the area where the others should have gone ashore. After that they became scattered among the thick scrub near the beach. Pedder himself, with most of one troop, made straight for the barracks on the hillside and occupied the building for a time. In a further advance several guns were captured, but about seven o'clock the invaders were checked by heavy fire from hidden positions. Pedder fell, mortally wounded, all his officers were killed or wounded, and the survivors were compelled to surrender.

Another of the troops in this group was more fortunate. Cutting inland and veering northward our men accepted the surrender of forty French Colonials, and then made their way back. Just before dark they reached the Litani at the point where the wrecked bridge had carried the main road to Sidon over the river. Here they were relieved to find the Australians in possession of the northern bank and busy on the construction of a pontoon bridge. They crossed to the southern side, bringing all their prisoners with them.

Captain More's party further north also ran into trouble from the very start. Two of their landing-craft were sunk at sea and the troops who got ashore were rapidly scattered by Vichy fire. Confused fighting continued throughout the day with Vichy employing tanks, armoured cars, 155-mm. guns and mortars, while aircraft endeavoured to locate from the air the little clusters of British troops. They had been landed too far north to have much hope of working through to the Litani and linking up with the Australians. Two heroic attempts were made to storm the barracks, now re-occupied



by the enemy, in the course of the afternoon and fighting continued far into the night with the small and isolated British parties gradually being worn down and destroyed. Shortly before daylight Captain More with the handful of men that remained to him was compelled to surrender at Aiteniye.

The commando had lost over a quarter of its strength, even after allowance is made for those who subsequently trickled back to our lines, and those who were released by the Australian advance on the following day. And it had not accomplished what it had set out to do. Nevertheless the defence of the Litani river was now severely shaken and the enemy dispositions in rear were disorganized.

We must now turn to the main advance of the 21st Australian Brigade which moved along the road from Tyre. The leading battalion, the 2/16th, had orders to attack at 7.30 a.m. if, by that time, the commando had not succeeded in gaining a bridgehead; actually, the first effort was made by an impatient company which tried to rush the Litani bridge at dawn. The bridge was blown when the Australians were only fifty yards from it, but one man swam the river under heavy fire, carrying a line which enabled a platoon to cross, six or seven at a time, in their assault boats, all under the fire of mortars and machine guns. By 11 a.m. fifty Australians were established on the northern bank. By four in the afternoon two companies had arrived, and they carried some of the Vichy positions overlooking the river, taking fifty prisoners and ten machine guns. The work was completed by a night attack delivered by the 2/16th Battalion and the 2/27th, and by the dawn of June 10th Vichy opposition along the Litani was completely broken. Vehicles now began to pass over the pontoon bridge which Australian sappers had worked all night to complete.

At Aiteniye the French garrison obligingly surrendered to their prisoner, Captain More, whom they had held in captivity for a few hours only; and elsewhere groups of Pedder's men were set free. There was very little evidence of ill-treatment of our prisoners; on the contrary, relations seem to have been generally friendly between captors and captives and the French showed little reluctance when it came to exchanging rôles with More and his men. The prisoners taken by us at this stage of the campaign expressed a willingness to see a British victory, but insisted that the invasion of Syria had been unnecessary since there were no German troops in the country. Subsequent captives, particularly those taken by the Free French troops, showed themselves less complaisant, while the treatment accorded

to British, Australian and Indian prisoners, often violated the customary usages of war.

Four hundred of the Vichy troops fell into our hands on this day, as well as field guns, armoured cars and machine guns, and the Australians were able to continue their advance up the coastal road. The cavalry regiment from the 6th Australian Division, which had fought in Cyrenaica, led the way with Bren carriers and light tanks. The carriers overran and seized by the roadside four abandoned Vichy tanks. At first the Australians were inclined to regard these as little better than scrap metal, describing them as 'home-made' jobs with armour inadequate to withstand the fire of our anti-tank guns. Subsequent experience caused them to modify this view, and during the later stages of the campaign we were glad to make use of any French fighting vehicles which fell into our hands to help us redress our inferiority in this important arm.

Before the end of the day the Australian infantry were at grips with the enemy again about five miles further on up the coastal road. This time it was the Foreign Legion, who had established themselves in a honeycomb of ancient Phoenician caves, linked together by tunnels, from which they offered a most determined resistance. Firing from cover, they rendered the approach a positive death-trap. No infantry could get anywhere near them with any hope of survival, so it was left to the 25-pdrs. to blast the way with shell-fire directed straight into the mouths of the caverns. The bombardment lasted for three hours before the infantry were able to go forward again. Small-arms fire continued to pour out of one particular cavern until a shell from one of our guns burst slap in the mouth, and even then, as the Australians groped their way in through a cloud of bitter, acrid smoke, over a floor littered with empty cartridge cases, they were met with a spatter of bullets from the surviving defenders who had pulled back to make a last fight of it in the innermost extremity of the cavern.

Next morning, well before daybreak, enemy gun positions in the hills near by were stormed by the 2/27th Battalion, following another artillery bombardment.

For some days following the passage of the Litani our coastal column continued its arduous progress, the Vichy troops maintaining their resistance from various points of vantage in the hills overlooking the main road. Vichy tanks made a number of wasp-like attacks from the inland flank: small groups of these vehicles would dash down the hilly tracks towards the coastal road to shoot up isolated groups of infantry and then withdraw quickly, often before our



anti-tank guns could engage them. Sometimes the French used the abundant cover of the coastal strip and the lower ridges to fight their tanks defensively. They would lie up in wait for our advancing infantry and then open fire at short range. One such ambush was sprung on June 12th when a company of Australians nearly stumbled on top of four Vichy tanks in hull-down positions close to the shore. On this occasion our own guns were able to open promptly and effectively, compelling the tanks to withdraw before much damage had been done.

The enemy was fighting an extremely skilful delaying action, making full use of the defensive possibilities of the ground and such weapon superiority as he enjoyed. This superiority manifested itself chiefly in armour, his tanks being both more numerous and better armoured than our own; also, if only for a time, he was the stronger in the air. Moreover, our commanders had to husband their troops, for reinforcements simply were not available if the forward units took heavy losses. We had few troops in general reserve, and though artillery often saved lives by blasting a way for the infantry, such a method scarcely made for speedy progress; and supplies of gun ammunition were limited. The Syrian campaign had to be waged on a shoestring, and that must always be taken into account in assessing the speed of our progress and the success of our tactics.

By June 12th the Australian brigade advancing up the coastal road had reached a point a dozen miles beyond the Litani. Here they found the enemy established in a strong position, with artillery and tank support, denying us the approaches to the lateral road which forks off south-eastward towards Merjayoun. This position was forced and by evening the Australian vanguard was nearing the whitewalled houses of Sidon, a considerable town—whereas Tyre nowadays is little more than a fishing village—situated on the coast twenty-four miles south of Beirut. Vichy was known to be holding this position in some strength and the Australians asked for a bombardment of the town by the naval units lying off shore under the command of Rear-Admiral E. L. S. King. But the admiral was compelled to reply that he had no authority to fire on other than military targets: we certainly could not risk the possible destruction of civilian life or property in Sidon.

The attack launched next morning by the 2/16th Battalion was not successful. It had been preceded by a bombardment of strictly military objectives—the plantations south of Sidon, where Vichy troops and batteries were known to be concealed—the fire of the Australian guns being supplemented by that of the cruiser *Phæbe*,

the destroyers *Kandahar*, *Isis* and *Hotspur* and the Australian destroyer *Stuart*; but when the infantry went forward they encountered an obstinate resistance. From the cover of the plantations Vichy tanks delivered a well-timed counter-attack, and our anti-tank guns, from positions too far in rear, could not engage them at effective range. The Australian infantry suffered accordingly. Some parties actually reached the nearest houses of Sidon, but they were unable to remain there; indeed, they were lucky to get back at all and only did so through the skilful manœuvring of the Bren carriers of the cavalry regiment, which successfully drew the fire of the tanks.

On the right, the 2/27th Battalion, advancing through the hills, was not yet in position to attack. We appear to have been very much outnumbered and outweighed this day, for the French had four battalions against our two, and their aircraft were in complete control of the sky over the battlefield, bombing the Australian batteries and machine-gunning any movement seen on the coastal road. Everywhere the Vichy troops held their ground. It was the hardest and most unrewarding day we had so far experienced.

Next day, June 14th, the attack was renewed. On this occasion the centre of gravity was shifted to the 2/27th, the right-hand battalion. Brigadier Stevens had decided that the dominating point was a village bearing the improbable name of Miye ou Miye which looked down upon Sidon from the hills at a distance of not much more than a mile. Accordingly he ordered the 2/27th Battalion to seize this point, which was bitterly contested. By the end of the day the French had still not been wholly driven out and it seemed unlikely that Sidon would fall until we could clear this feature and dominate the port and its approaches with our guns.

Near the coast the men of the 2/16th Battalion were pinned down in the orchards just south of the town. They could not get forward and they looked to be in a critical situation when Vichy again counter-attacked with tanks. This situation was saved by the Australian anti-tank gunners whose sustained and accurate fire, maintained at intense pressure for nearly an hour, dispersed the attack.

One observer has recorded how he climbed a hill and saw below him six French tanks moving 'like lice' across a sloping field. Then he marked a sudden flash from a grove of trees half a mile distant from the tanks. The Australians anti-tank guns had opened fire from new and unsuspected positions.

'They had taken up their position among the trees under a 'screen provided by an artillery barrage earlier in the afternoon.



'Other flashes followed from different points. The whole battery of anti-tank guns was hidden in the woods. spurts of dust shot up round one tank, which hurriedly turned about and scurried back to safety behind another grove further back. Then the anti-tank guns turned their attention to the other five tanks. I could see flashes as the tanks returned their fire. Their defiance was short-lived. They also quickly wheeled round and hurried away, out of range of the Australian gunners.'

The same observer wrote at the end of the day:

'Our guns fired 2,600 rounds in 50 minutes. Officers and men were absolutely prostrated with physical weariness when it ended. I saw the hands of some of the gunners after the barrage. They were blistered and swollen from handling the heavy shells at high speed.'

Throughout the day the Vichy forces were certainly controlled with great skill. The combination of 75-mm. field guns, tanks and snipers was admirably suited to an aggressive defence. The gunfire was remarkably accurate and drew reluctant praise from our own artillerymen; the tanks were always liable to throw our advance into reverse with one of their sudden counter-thrusts; and the individual snipers who lay close up to our forward positions, or even within them, took considerable toll and did their full share in hampering our movements.

However, the combination of a heavy bombardment by our field guns with the shelling from the flank by our naval units—the destroyers *Isis* and *Kimberley* took up the attack on June 14th—at length prevailed. The retention of Sidon was made altogether too costly for the defenders. On Sunday, June 15th, the naval bombardment was resumed at dawn. Presently the 2/27th Battalion resumed its advance on the right. Miye ou Miye was captured and also the high ground beyond it, and from the ridge above Sidon an Australian colonel peering through his field-glasses observed a singular absence of movement in and around Sidon. The colonel decided to investigate. He sent forward a patrol which simply drove unimpeded straight down the road into the town and received a warm welcome from the inhabitants. For the French had pulled out during the night, and by four o'clock in the afternoon the tired and battle-grimed men of the 2/16th Battalion were limping through the streets while dark-eyed beauties ogled them from the windows and swarms of small boys dived at their ankles to the accompaniment of the inevitable refrain of 'Shoe shine, Captain? Shoe shine, Captain?'

The town—it has a population of 50,000—was little damaged,

and the enthusiasm of the civilian population, who had been badly scared as the guns roared ever nearer, was therefore comprehensible. With Sidon fell the second of the Vichy main positions defending the approach to Beirut by the coastal road. The French had fought with bitter determination. General Dentz, it appeared, had visited the front here only two days earlier and told the troops that, unless they resisted to the utmost, reprisals were liable to be taken against their kinsmen imprisoned by the Germans. And they were to shoot all British who attempted to parley.

During the Vichy withdrawal our naval bombardments appear to have been particularly effective. They were reported to have destroyed twelve guns and a number of tanks.

With the Litani line gone and Sidon gone after eight days' fighting, only the Damour position now remained in front of Beirut. And if Beirut fell, it was improbable that resistance by the French in Syria and Lebanon could be very much longer sustained. Yet before the advance against this final line could develop the Australian brigade on the coast was halted by news of developments further east, inland among the mountains around Merjayoun.

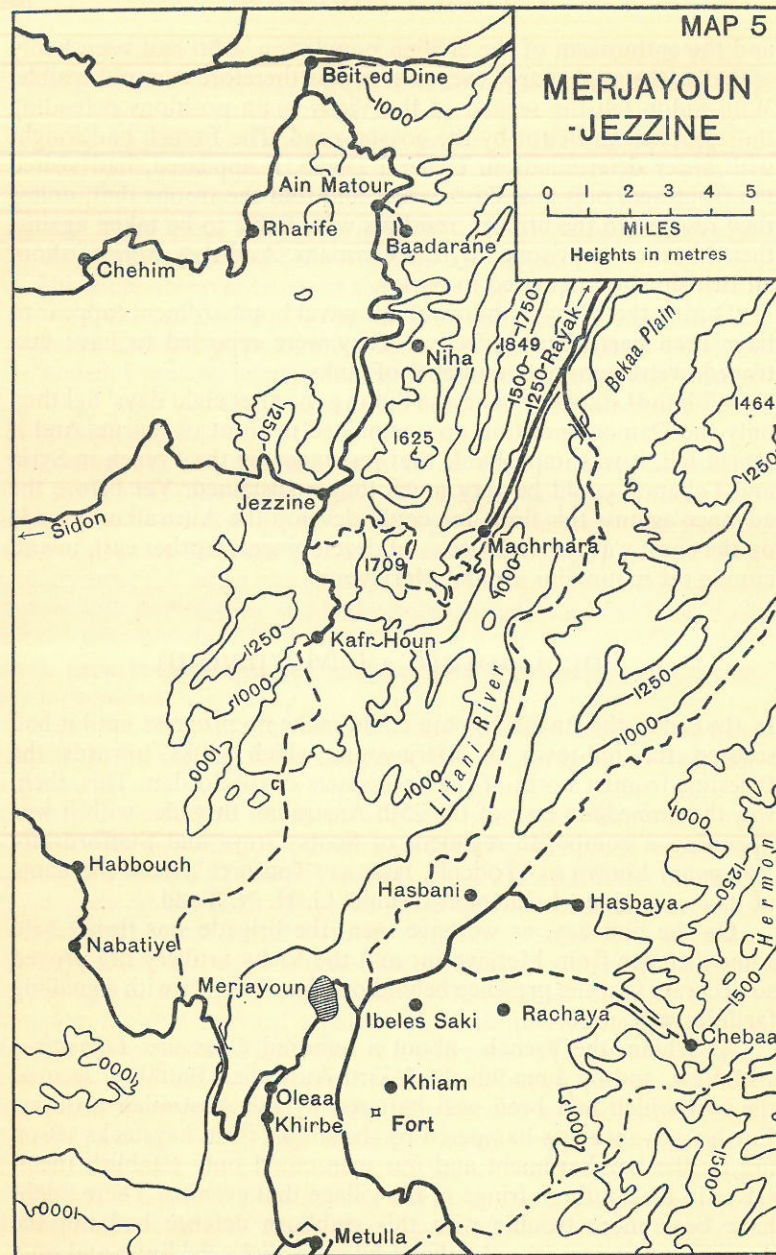
## The Capture of Merjayoun

IN the centre the Rayak column could make no progress until it had secured the hill-town of Merjayoun, which looks towards the Palestine frontier north of the headwaters of the Jordan. This, then, was the immediate task of the 25th Australian Brigade; with it was operating a composite regiment of Scots Greys and Staffordshire Yeomanry known as 'Todcol', later as 'Todforce', from the name of its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel G. H. N. Todd.

On the first day, as we have seen, the brigade was firmly held some distance from Merjayoun; and the Vichy artillery fire proved so accurate that the presence behind our lines of spies with signalling facilities was suspected.

At Khiam the French—about a hundred *Chasseurs Libanais*—withdrew, and on June 9th the 2/33rd Australian Battalion secured the fort which had been well battered by the Australian artillery. Further advance was hampered by the smoke from haystacks set on fire by the bombardment and our men could only establish themselves in the southern fringe of the village that evening. There might have been more trouble with this stubborn defence had not the Australian gunners scored a direct hit on a Vichy field-gun and on a





large ammunition dump: as it was, the 2/33rd was in full possession of Khiam village by the early morning of June 10th.

Something like a 'full dress' attack, supported by the fire of two artillery regiments was put in by the 25th Australian Brigade next day and achieved a substantial success. A company of the 2/25th Battalion took Ibeles Saki on the northern end of the Khiam spur with very little trouble; the 2/33rd, next on the left, also advanced; and, further to the west, the 2/31st Battalion and the remainder of the 2/25th carried the villages of Khirbe and Oleaa on the road to Merjayoun. This engagement, which was witnessed by Major-General Lavarack, inflicted considerable loss upon the enemy and yielded fifty prisoners.

Now the Australian batteries could bring Merjayoun under fire; but soon after mid-day a delegation of the townspeople (by some freak of migration the place is inhabited mainly by Greeks) arrived with a white flag to surrender the town. The Vichy troops had gone.

On June 12th Todforce was sent forward along a road leading north-eastward to Hasbaya. This turning movement, for such it was intended to be, came to nothing, for it was checked by heavy fire west of Hasbaya which appeared to be held in considerable strength. Todforce was withdrawn to Merjayoun. The company of the 2/33rd Australian Battalion which had advanced still further to the east into the foothills of Mount Hermon also came in during this day and the following night, platoon by platoon.

On the western flank the Cheshire Yeomanry had occupied Nabatiye, where a bridge had been partly demolished. A little further on a large crater blocked the road to the coast.

This day, June 12th, saw a fairly heavy attack by Vichy aircraft which caused the 25th Australian Brigade a number of casualties. Brigade headquarters were bombed and battery positions were machine-gunned.

Owing to the mountainous nature of the country and the temper of the Vichy resistance the question now arose as to whether it would not be wiser to stay on the defensive in this region and strengthen the thrust towards Beirut, the more important objective. General Wilson himself was dubious about an advance northwards from Merjayoun, and Lavarack, the divisional commander, suggested the transference of the bulk of his 25th Brigade to assist the 21st Brigade in its progress along the coast.

Accordingly, a mixed mobile force, consisting of the 2/31st Battalion in lorries, a platoon of machine-gunners, light tanks of the 6th Australian Division cavalry, a battery of 25-pdrs., and a detachment



of anti-tank guns was made ready to move out by the Nabitiye road and then northward by a very doubtful mountain track to Jezzine. Arrived here it was expected to open up contact with the coastal force at Sidon. At 7 p.m. on June 13th the column started out on its nightmare journey through the mountains towards Jezzine, a good twenty-five miles distant by crazy, winding, vertiginous tracks which had nothing to recommend them save the improbability that Vichy would have posted any considerable forces to defend such a difficult route.

The column travelled all through the night without lights, crawling along the mountain roads and stopping for the guns to be unlimbered and man-handled round the worst bends. More than once a lorry overturned, but it was always righted and set on its way again and men and vehicles laboured on through the darkness.

It was indeed a nightmare march. Tanks bellied themselves on the rocks that thrust up from the narrow surface of the road. They heaved and threshed their tracks until the driver coaxed them clear. Their engines ran hot and reeked with oil. Men and machines were powdered with grey dust. One tank broke down and had to be pushed off the road, over a cliff, so that the advance could continue.

Morning came, and the column continued on its way, moving now a trifle faster in the daylight but finding that the track deteriorated progressively as the snake-like file of vehicles climbed higher into the mountains.

Five miles south of Jezzine, near a village called Kafr Houn, the vanguard of Bren-carriers encountered a road-block barring the way at an awkward point on the route where the road took a downhill course. This road-block was covered by infantry with machine guns and it was necessary for the guns accompanying the column to come into action. Under cover of their fire it was possible for the infantry to break through, and the advance continued. At 6 p.m. an attack was launched upon a hill which dominated Jezzine from the south, the Australians having to negotiate steeply terraced vineyards, first downward then upward to the objective. The Vichy troops fought stoutly for the hill, but were routed with rifle and bayonet, and the final advance into Jezzine was made by a cliff-like descent but against no opposition. By nightfall of the 14th the Australians were in position on the heights east of the town and held the roads leading out to the west and north. Next morning the lateral road to Sidon on the coast was reported clear, and some Australian trucks drove right through later in the day. As the 2/25th Australian Battalion was soon ordered up from Merjayoun, the bulk of the 25th Brigade,

under Brigadier Cox, was now committed to Jezzine. At Merjayoun the sole remaining battalion, the 2/33rd (Lieutenant-Colonel R. F. Monaghan) received orders to keep up the pressure on the enemy. The Greys and the Staffordshire Yeomanry were still available in this sector, and a company of the 2/5th Australian Battalion was sent up from the lines of communication. On the western flank an attempt was made to link up with the 21st Australian Brigade by the road leading north-westward from Nabatiye to the coast; but carriers could not get beyond Habbouch.

## On the Road to Damascus

AWAY to the east the advance against Damascus was making steady progress. Following their repulse of the first attack by the Royal Fusiliers, the Vichy garrison at Kuneitra evacuated the place during the night of June 8th/9th and the Fusiliers moved in next morning. In the same fashion the 5th Indian Brigade was able to occupy both Sheikh Meskine and Ezraa.

The way was now clear for Legentilhomme's Free French troops to take up the advance. They had crossed the frontier on the previous day singing the 'Marseillaise', and now moved through the Indian brigade at Sheikh Meskine to continue northward along the road to Damascus.

No opposition was encountered during the day, except from the Vichy dive-bombers, which protected the retreat of their ground forces. Outcrops of rough basaltic rock made progress painful for the barefoot Senegalese and cut boots to ribbons; nevertheless the column covered more than twenty-five miles along the road to Damascus during this second day of the campaign. Captured documents revealed that two defended positions lay ahead. The first, at a distance of about eleven miles from the capital, extended from Bourak on the eastern flank, along the heights of Jebel Maani to Kissoue and thence followed the line of the Aouadj river as far as Deir-Khabie. The second, over two miles further on, included the ridges called Jebel Kelb and Jebel Madani.

*Groupement Collet* had crossed behind the front of the advance to protect the eastern flank, finding in this volcanic country of big boulders and deep wadis that horses were as handy, if not handier, than motor transport. The villages in this part of Syria were variously populated, some of them being inhabited by Circassians who gave their compatriots a warm welcome. Collet himself had hoped that



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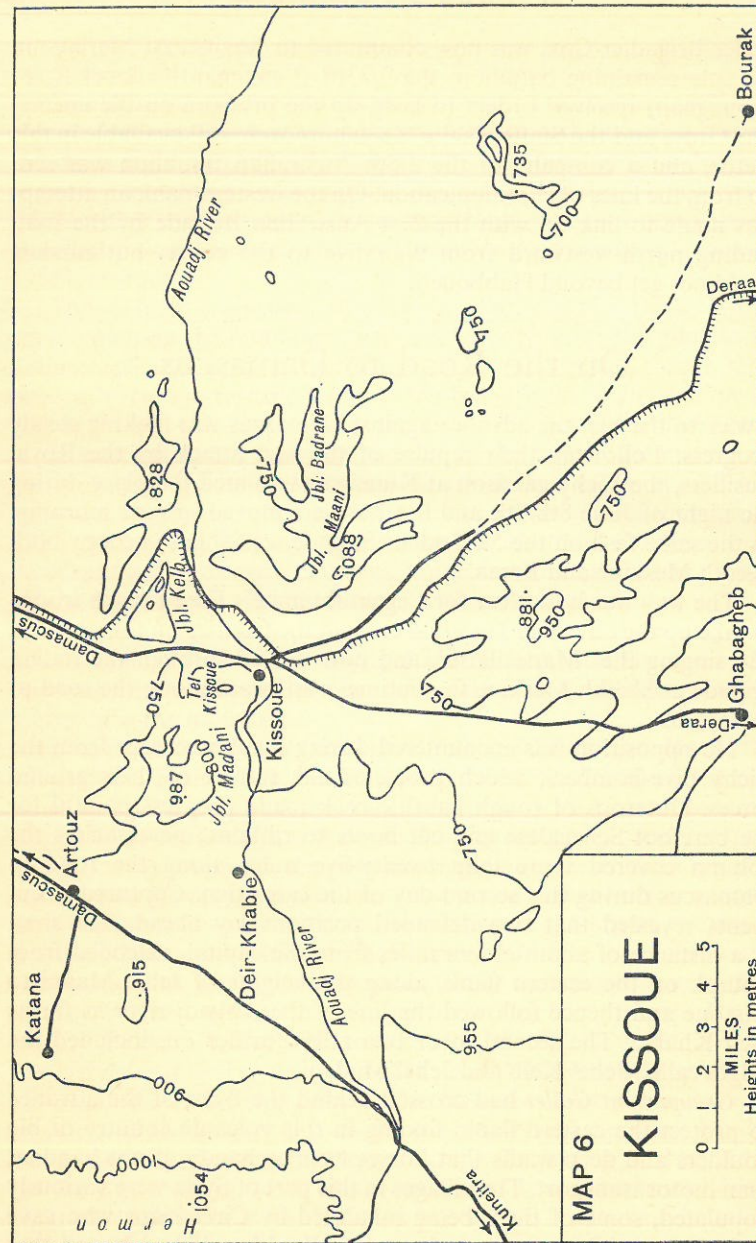
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The way was now clear for Legentilhomme's Free French troops to take up the advance. They had crossed the frontier on the previous day singing the 'Marseillaise', and now moved through the Indian brigade at Sheikh Meskine to continue northward along the road to Damascus.

No opposition was encountered during the day, except from the Vichy dive-bombers, which protected the retreat of their ground forces. Outcrops of rough basaltic rock made progress painful for the barefoot Senegalese and cut boots to ribbons; nevertheless the column covered more than twenty-five miles along the road to Damascus during this second day of the campaign. Captured documents revealed that two defended positions lay ahead. The first, at a distance of about eleven miles from the capital, extended from Bourak on the eastern flank, along the heights of Jebel Maani to Kissoue and thence followed the line of the Aouadj river as far as Deir-Khabie. The second, over two miles further on, included the ridges called Jebel Kelb and Jebel Madani.

*Groupement Collet* had crossed behind the front of the advance to protect the eastern flank, finding in this volcanic country of big boulders and deep wadis that horses were as handy, if not handier, than motor transport. The villages in this part of Syria were variously populated, some of them being inhabited by Circassians who gave their compatriots a warm welcome. Collet himself had hoped that





the remaining Circassian squadrons would now rally to him, but adequate measures had been taken to prevent their defection.

Legentilhomme closed up and established contact with the first Vichy position by the evening of June 9th. He had intended to attack next day, but the difficult country had hampered the forward movement of the artillery, and two reinforcing battalions were delayed by a breakdown on the railway at Deraa. Collet, on June 10th, succeeded in crossing the Aouadj river and made some prisoners, but as he had no artillery and was exposed to air attack he withdrew again later.

On the morning of June 11th the Free French went in against Jebel Maani, the eastern arm of the Vichy main position, Senegalese engaging Moroccans who were not disposed to give way. But progress, if slow, was steady. Collet was attacked by tanks and armoured cars which he successfully repulsed with his solitary anti-tank gun.

Next day the highest points of Jebel Maani were secured by the Senegalese, who were fighting well, and the R.A.F. bombed and machine-gunned Vichy battery positions around Kissoué. The Free French casualties were light; Jebel Badrane, the eastern finger of the *massif* had already been occupied: there were hopes of a considerable success. Then came reports that Vichy tanks were moving round the right flank, and Legentilhomme therefore ordered his troops to stand fast on the ground they had won, and moved a battalion of the Foreign Legion to safeguard his right. Actually the tanks seen were not Vichy's but part of Collet's force which continued to be active but had not the striking power to undertake decisive action. In the evening General Legentilhomme was wounded, his arm being broken by a bomb splinter in the course of an air attack upon a Free French convoy. The indomitable little man was loth to leave the battle and soon returned from the field ambulance where he was treated.

Meanwhile General Wilson put the 5th Indian Brigade under Free French command for a renewal of the attack, Brigadier Lloyd succeeding General Legentilhomme as a temporary measure. Lieutenant-Colonel L. B. Jones of the Rajputana Rifles assumed command of the Indian brigade.

On June 13th the Senegalese consolidated their positions and the R.A.F. again struck at the Vichy batteries. After making a personal reconnaissance Brigadier Lloyd judged that the Vichy positions could only be carried by a freshly mounted attack: more artillery must be brought up and battery positions and observation posts selected. He aimed at clearing the way to Damascus by one blow,



and this, it was decided, could not be delivered until June 15th. At least we were now at grips with the main Vichy forces in this region, and one effect of our advance had been the abandonment of Mezze aerodrome, outside Damascus.

## Taking Stock

THE first week of the Syrian operations closed on a note of somewhat modified optimism. Progress had been slow, slower than public opinion at Home had expected; for after the first day the resistance of the Vichy troops had everywhere stiffened and any hope of mass desertions to our side had disappeared. The optimistic view had never been encouraged by General Wavell who, only too well aware of the paucity—one might say the inadequacy—of our forces and the difficulties of the country, expected no decisive success.

On the coast we had advanced forty miles into Vichy territory; in the centre around Merjayoun less than ten; and on the east, towards Damascus, approximately fifty. The Vichy superiority in the air, though bearing no relation to the overwhelming odds which our troops had encountered in Greece and Crete, had not yet been moderated by the systematic offensive which the R.A.F. was conducting against the Vichy airfields and petrol dumps. Our cruisers and destroyers covering the flank of the coastal operations had been unable to bring the swifter French destroyers to action and were hampered by enemy bombing attacks. Fortunately German air assistance to Vichy was on an extremely modest scale: a few attacks on our troops and shipping, but that was all. There seemed no indication that further German action was probable or, indeed, possible.

Our losses amounted to no more than five hundred, much the highest proportion of which had been borne by the commando in the fighting on the Litani. It was impossible to compute the Vichy losses in killed and wounded, but we had captured over eight hundred prisoners. Vichy desertions had been few.

Officer prisoners generally remained firmly pro-Vichy and showed an ugly spirit under interrogation as on the occasion when a Vichy captain deliberately turned his back upon Legentilhomme. It must be remembered that by most of these officers the Free French were regarded merely as rebels and schismatics. Many soldiers testified that their pay had been increased to exceed the rates received by the British and that this scale would be maintained even

though they had become prisoners of war—so long as they did not join the ranks of de Gaulle.

General Wavell had already ordered up another infantry brigade and a field regiment of artillery from Egypt, though these troops could ill be spared. Also, in the plans for the Syrian operation, the Commander-in-Chief had included an invasion of northern Syria from Iraq where the situation was now restored, although the mutterings of discontent had not entirely died away. 'Habforce', whose mobile column had crossed the desert from Palestine to Baghdad, would soon be available for an advance westward against the Vichy communications between Damascus and Homs.

Nor was this all. On the eve of the invasion of Syria General Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief in India, had suggested the occupation of the north-eastern corner of Syria: this to be undertaken by Indian forces from Iraq with the object of protecting the railway from Tel Kotchek to Nusaybin and 'any landing-grounds in that area', thus preserving communications with Turkey. On June 18th General Wavell expressed his desire for the employment of two brigade groups from northern Iraq, if sufficient transport could be provided for them. As will be seen later, no time was lost in getting these troops upon the move.



### CHAPTER III

## VICHY COUNTERSTROKE

IN the early morning of June 15th Lieutenant-Colonel Monaghan moved out eastward from the Merjayoun position with three companies of his 2/33rd Battalion to execute a turning movement by way of the mountain mass of Hermon.<sup>1</sup> At first there was no sign of enemy activity, but later the correspondent of *The Times*, who was present, noted as 'puzzling' a persistent shelling of Merjayoun by the Vichy batteries.

At three in the afternoon, under cover of this bombardment, infantry, armoured cars and tanks were launched against Merjayoun and Ibeles Saki. Two battalions led the way, and these, it appears, were supported by another battalion—all Colonial infantry. The armoured cars and tanks were manned by Spahis and *Chasseurs d'Afrique*.

With three companies of good Australian infantry away in the Hermon hills and out of touch we were too weak to withstand the shock. Ibeles Saki was lost and then Khiam. At Merjayoun the company of the 2/5th Australian Battalion and some of the Scots Greys were still holding a line north of the town at dusk when the Vichy attack ceased; but during the night this little force was prudently withdrawn to a position at the road-junction north of Oleaa. So the enemy recovered Merjayoun.

There seemed no reason why the Vichy troops, now masters of Merjayoun and Khiam, should pause in their progress, for there was little to prevent them driving on to Metulla and into Palestine. Yet pause they did while Major-General Lavarack promptly took measures to protect his communications and to build up his forces south of Merjayoun in readiness to hit back.

From his small reserve he ordered the 2/3rd Australian Machine-Gun Battalion (less two companies) with the 5th Australian Anti-Tank Battery, to hold the Jordan bridge at Jisr Benett Yacoub, and the possible crossing places through the marshlands north of Lake Hula. A little later parties of the newly-arrived 9th Australian Division cavalry regiment took a share of the responsibility for the

<sup>1</sup> Map 5.

frontier roads in these areas. As will be related in due course, Lavarack was also called upon to send assistance to Kuneitra where the Vichy counterstroke had achieved a startling success.

No time had been lost in sending runners to recall from their turning movement east of Merjayoun the three companies of the 2/33rd; and troops were summoned from Jezzine where Brigadier Cox was himself hard pressed. The 2/2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion, which was working on forward communications, was hurried up to guard, and prepare for demolition, the bridge over the Litani river south-west of Merjayoun. On the night of the 15th all the forces in the area were placed under Brigadier F. N. Berryman, commanding the artillery of the 7th Australian Division, who hurried back from Jezzine.

Next morning two companies of the 2/33rd were in position south of Khiam, the first company to rejoin from the eastward venture having come in at 6 a.m. North of Oleaa the company of the 2/5th and the British cavalry had been reinforced by a company of the Pioneers, the remainder of this battalion holding the Litani bridgehead.

At 10 a.m. two Vichy tanks approached the Oleaa position and one of these was promptly knocked out by the Australian anti-tank gunners. The other quickly withdrew. During the afternoon the two companies of the 2/33rd south of Khiam were attacked from both flanks and fell back to a better position. About four o'clock, however, the 2/25th Battalion came in from the Jezzine area, and during the night the two remaining companies of the 2/33rd rejoined from the eastern flank. Near the village of Rachaya they had been involved in an affair with Vichy cavalry and, after inflicting considerable loss upon the horsemen, found themselves in possession of thirty-two Arab stallions. The Arabs were eventually handed over to the 6th Australian Division cavalry who formed two horsed troops. These, popularly known as 'Kelly's Gang', did good work during the remainder of the campaign.

The first attempt to recover Merjayoun was made at half-past four on the morning of June 17th. Two companies of Pioneers and a company of the 2/3rd Machine-Gun Battalion attacked from the south and succeeded in approaching the fort which masked the town; but they were then forced back some distance by a counter-attack of Vichy tanks. Though unsuccessful, this effort had certainly kept some of the enemy's armour concentrated in the vicinity, thus providing good targets for our artillery. Meanwhile the 2/25th Battalion had entered the Litani gorge north-west of Merjayoun



and waded the swift-flowing river which was almost breast-high. The attack south-eastward up a rugged uneven slope was a rather disorganized business. Men of three different platoons got into the town at different points, only to be forced out again by the fire of tanks and artillery. So the 2/25th fell back to take cover in the gullies on the hillside between Merjayoun and the river, and the day's fighting died down in an artillery duel. The Vichy guns shelled the Litani bridge. Those of the Australians concentrated upon the fort south of Merjayoun.

The effect of the crisis at Merjayoun was to leave us dangerously weak in numbers at Jezzine. On the afternoon of June 15th an attack from the north was repulsed by the Australian artillery, and next day the 2/31st Battalion fought off Vichy armoured cars which advanced from the east along a track leading from Machrharah. There was no enemy activity on the western flank, where the Cheshire Yeomanry squadron was patrolling south of the Sidon road.

Soon after daylight on the 17th another assault was made upon the right flank. The Australians were at grips with a Senegalese battalion which they finally routed with the bayonet, taking prisoner two French officers and sixty-five of the Africans. Continuous pressure in this quarter showed that the enemy was trying an enveloping movement, while pushing in from the north where he occupied two commanding knolls. In the evening Brigadier Cox reported that he was opposed by a force estimated at three and a half battalions and must withdraw unless reinforced. He was informed that no withdrawal could be permitted.

The brigadier was concerned not only for his front and right flank. His line of supply, depending upon a single twisting, climbing, dipping mountain road, was constantly threatened. The last stretch of this road, leading into Jezzine from the south, came to be known among our troops as the 'Mad Mile'. There was certainly a nightmare quality about it, for on the one side was a sheer cliff face, on the other a steep drop of over a thousand feet to the valley below. The Vichy artillerymen, back in the hills to the north, had trained their guns upon it, and at unpleasantly frequent intervals a salvo of 75-mm. shells would burst upon the Mad Mile. It was a grim experience for the truck drivers who had to run the gauntlet of fire, but though vehicles were frequently hit and had to be jettisoned the majority got through and the flow of supplies did not fail.

On the 18th a company of the 2/31st attempted an attack with artillery support only to be enfiladed from both flanks and stopped

with many casualties. Yet the Australians lost no ground. At half-past five in the afternoon six Vichy bombers, escorted by fighters, dropped twenty bombs on Jezzine killing seventeen and injuring ten Australians at the battalion ration store. That night the 2/14th Battalion arrived from the 21st Australian Brigade on the coast, a very welcome, indeed an essential reinforcement; for the 2/31st were very tired and had suffered considerable loss.

The results of the Vichy counterstroke are beginning to be seen. Not only was the Rayak column turned out of Merjayoun, but our advance towards Beirut by the coast road had to be delayed. After the despatch of the 2/14th Battalion to Jezzine, Brigadier Stevens, at Sidon, had not sufficient troops to continue any kind of offensive. He was ordered to 'halt and adopt an aggressive defence until the situation at Merjayoun has been cleared up.'

And to clear up the situation at Merjayoun proved no easy task. At 5.20 a.m. on June 19th Berryman made a fresh attempt to recover the town, the 2/25th Battalion attacking over the same ground as they had done two days before. Two companies broke in, from the north and from the west, but Vichy resisted stoutly, little groups of men fighting hand-to-hand. Prisoners were taken and sometimes re-taken. Personal prowess and skilful leadership might well have decided the issue in favour of the Australians had it not been for the intervention of the Vichy armour. The Australians, who had been unable to get their anti-tank guns forward over the rugged ground, were soon at a decided disadvantage. They split into three groups. One clung on to a corner of the town, fighting bitterly from house to house with hand-grenades. The second group found a tank-proof position in a wood rather to the north of the town. The third took refuge in a cemetery where the strongly-built walls baffled the efforts of the French tanks to break in; and while the tanks, like the hosts of Midian, prowled and prowled around they became the target of the Australian guns which were able to engage them with long-range but effective fire. Several Vichy tanks were knocked out during the day and here must be recorded the action of a very gallant gunner subaltern, Arthur Roden Cutler, who established his forward observation post actually within Merjayoun, whence he was able to direct fire upon Vichy transport entering the town.

The day's fighting, hotly contested, had not developed altogether unfavourably for the Australians, but the forward detachments could not be maintained in their exposed positions. They were withdrawn towards the Litani when darkness fell. Back, too, came



Lieutenant Cutler, who had been obliged to go to ground in Merjayoun surrounded by Vichy troops of the Foreign Legion, but managed to escape at night.

To the Royal Fusiliers at Kuneitra on the Damascus road<sup>1</sup> it seemed that the battle had rolled forward away from them. They lacked one company, left in reserve at Fiq, but a troop of the Royal Dragoons—new arrivals from Egypt—had joined them. No further reinforcement was to be expected, nor did it appear that such would be needed.

Then, early on June 15th, the battalion reported that its outpost company had been driven in by a force estimated at three tanks, seven armoured cars, and forty trucks filled with troops. Nothing more was heard from Kuneitra.

Lieutenant-Colonel A. D. G. Orr, commanding the Fusiliers, had already looked to his defences. The armoured cars of the Royals were used to block the Sheikh Meskine and Damascus roads, but the Fusiliers—less than 600 in all—were obliged to defend a large and ill-defined perimeter. The only anti-tank armament consisted of one 22-mm. Breda gun, for anti-tank rifles, grenades and 'Molotov cocktails'—which were calculated to burst and ignite on concussion—could hardly be expected to prevail against Vichy armour.

Early on the morning of June 16th an infantry attack was delivered but not pressed home, though snipers persistently worried the defenders. Then Vichy tanks advanced and with their cannon blasted their way through the road-blocks, forcing an entry into the town which was soon surrounded. The Breda gun, with a broken spring, was out of action early in the fight. Soon the enemy began a series of systematic combined attacks which reduced the Fusilier posts one by one. Our men offered a stubborn resistance and at least took their toll of the Vichy infantry; but all was of no avail. About noon those who were able rallied at battalion headquarters. Ammunition was running low, and, although the unequal combat continued amongst the houses, about 6 p.m. Colonel Orr was obliged to capitulate. A few officers and men, including most of the Royals, managed to escape later, after darkness had fallen.

The loss of Kuneitra was serious indeed. If the Vichy column continued its advance without delay there was little to prevent it following the good road which leads straight to the crossings of the upper Jordan and thence into Palestine. However, as will be related in due course, prompt dispositions were made to bar the way;

<sup>1</sup> Map 3.

and the danger passed when the enemy made no move to penetrate further south.

Vichy also struck from the territory of the Jebel Druse westward against Ezraa and Sheikh Meskine on the principal line of communication of the Free French and the Indian brigade, now at grips with the outer defences of Damascus. Fortunately this effort was rather in the nature of a reconnaissance in force, for the Vichy column was of no great strength. It consisted of two companies of Tunisian *tirailleurs* with about ten armoured cars, two field guns and three anti-tank guns and a few light tanks.

Even so, when it moved forward on the afternoon of June 15th the column found Ezraa an easy conquest, for only detachments of the Transjordan Frontier Force barred the way. Ezraa was occupied and a handful of prisoners taken. The enemy was now on the railway over twenty miles to the rear of the Free French headquarters at Ghabagheb: his next objective was Sheikh Meskine on the main road to the south. No attack, however, developed against this town until next day, June 16th, when hastily assembled detachments of Transjordan Frontier Force, Indians and Free French proved quite capable of holding their own. The Vichy column was not powerful enough to persevere; perhaps the shortage of petrol partly accounted for the inability of the motorised column to exploit the success it had gained. At any rate, the danger to Sheikh Meskine having passed, Colonel P. L. M. Wright, who was in local command, became chiefly concerned about Kuneitra. He had few men at his disposal but sent a troop of 25-pdrs., unescorted, up the Kuneitra road with orders to delay the enemy advance.

General Wilson had been prompt to call upon the 7th Australian Division for help in restoring the situation at Kuneitra. In addition, the 2nd Queen's, leading battalion of the British 16th Brigade, was about to arrive at Deraa from Egypt. This brigade was due to join the Australian command, but the Queen's were hurried forward to Sanamein, on the main road to Damascus, this same night.

The Australians, as we have seen, were forced to look to their own communications; but they contributed what they could. A company of the 2/3rd Machine-Gun Battalion, an anti-tank troop, and two armoured cars driven by Palestine policemen and manned by Yorkshire Dragoons, moved out from Jisr Benett Jacoub at 3.15 a.m. on June 17th. This column was commanded by Captain R. R. Gordon of the machine-gunners. On the way forward Gordon learned of the loss of Kuneitra and on nearing the place he had a



brush with Vichy tanks. He picked up the troop of 25-pdrs. sent by Colonel Wright from Sheikh Meskine on the previous day; and when the Queen's, moving westward from Sanamein, arrived he assisted by fire their evening attack which recaptured Kuneitra at little cost. The Vichy troops had sent their prisoners back, and were on the point of withdrawing northward.

Meanwhile, on the morning of June 17th, Colonel Génin, commanding the 1st Brigade of the Free French Division, attacked Ezraa with a battalion of Senegalese. But things went amiss: the attackers were scattered and Génin himself was killed. A little later a mixed force of sixty Senegalese, with two carrier-loads of Indians, an officer and ten men of the Royal Fusiliers who had escaped from the disaster at Kuneitra, three Free French officers, a number of the Transjordan Frontier Force, and a British corporal with a Bofors gun, all under the command of one Major Hackett, went forward to investigate Ezraa. The party had no great difficulty in rushing the village but met with considerable opposition from a blockhouse near by.

Eventually the corporal took his gun forward across the open and blasted the blockhouse embrasures, whereupon a number of our men rushed to the shelter of the western wall. Grenades were then lobbed, back-handed, through the loop-holes and ultimately the defenders—three French officers and 160 Tunisian riflemen—surrendered to Hackett whose own losses amounted to fourteen, four being killed. In Ezraa and its vicinity were captured two light tanks, sixteen light machine guns, several mortars and a field gun. Those of the enemy who made good their retreat were harried by Australian fighter aircraft.

We may now put ourselves in de Verdilhac's place and consider his purpose in delivering the counterstroke. After a week of defensive battle he could have had no illusions concerning the outcome of the campaign. He must have been aware of the limitations of his forces, and of the difficulties of receiving reinforcements whether by sea—at the ports of Beirut, Latakia and Tripoli<sup>1</sup>—by land across Turkey, or by air from the Dodecanese. Nothing had yet arrived, and with the end of the fighting in Iraq he could look for no aid from that side; nor was he likely to receive back the arms and ammunition which had been sent from Syria for the assistance of Rashid Ali in the previous month. Already it was clear that Hitler would not, and that

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.

Vichy could not, provide him with more than the most trifling assistance.

His own troops had in general fought extremely well, but it was questionable how much longer they could maintain an organized defence. Reserves were dwindling. The limited supplies of oil and petrol were, perhaps, already restricting the action of his aircraft, tanks, armoured cars and transport vehicles. It might soon be necessary to reinforce the open desert flank, for rumour—emanating largely from Turkey but not unassisted by British counter-intelligence sources—suggested that strong British columns were already on the move for Deir ez Zor. He must be prepared for attack upon Tel Kotchek, the tongue of territory known to the British command as the 'Duck's Bill', Deir ez Zor, Abu Kemal, and the desert oasis of Palmyra, the city of Queen Zenobia.

So the Vichy commander probably reckoned that the limited resources which remained to him could be employed more effectively in attack than in defence. Such strength as he had was not worth conserving, and he hoped to inflict, by surprise action, the maximum damage on the Allied forces. The objectives of his thrusts—Merjayoun, Kuneitra and Ezraa—were well selected to cause the maximum disturbance to our lines of communication without, in all probability, involving him in any head-on clashes with equally well-armed troops. That is to say he struck at our weakest points.

De Verdilhac obviously aimed to loosen the tightening grip of the Indian and Free French troops upon the approaches to Damascus; and a penetration into Palestine would have caused considerable disorganization and prevented the Allies from pushing their advance for some weeks. There was also the consideration that even a local reverse inflicted upon the Free French would go far to destroy the prestige of de Gaulle in the Middle East and perhaps deal a mortal blow to the Free French movement. Finally, we may assume that with de Verdilhac it was a matter of professional pride to wage war to the best of his means and ability so long as his forces remained in being. He certainly proved no mean opponent.

The counterstroke had only a limited success and that only as a delaying action. We have seen how our main advance, along the coast towards Beirut, was held up through lack of troops owing to the necessity of reinforcing Jezzine whence assistance had to be sent to the area of Merjayoun. Curiously enough the arrival of Vichy troops on Legentilhomme's line of communication had little or no effect upon his—or rather Brigadier Lloyd's—thrust towards Damascus which was soon to result in the occupation of the city.



In a signal to General Wilson on June 16th Legentilhomme reported that the battle for Damascus was going well 'in front', but that Collet was suffering from air attack and Kuneitra was demanding anti-tank guns of which there were none to send; more troops were needed to guard his line of communication. The French commander expressed no doubts or apprehensions concerning the success of our bid for Damascus. As a matter of fact our attack upon the Kissoue position had been delivered before the Vichy counterstroke was launched; and it is to the operations at and beyond Kissoue that we must now turn.

## CHAPTER IV

# CAPTURE OF DAMASCUS

## Kissoue

IN the hour before dawn on Sunday, June 15th, much earlier on that same 'loud Sabbath' than the Vichy counterstroke, the main attack began against the Kissoue position that covered the approach to Damascus from the south.<sup>1</sup>

The opposing forces were approximately equal in numerical strength, but the Vichy French had the advantage of position and also an important superiority in tanks and armoured cars. The attack of the Senegalese fighting under the Free French standard had breached the first line of the defence by the capture of Jebel Maani on the eastern flank, but it was still necessary for the main body of the attack to cross the Aouadj river and take Kissoue before the assault could be developed against the line of hills beyond.

The storming of Kissoue seemed likely to prove a difficult and costly task. The village was surrounded by an anti-tank ditch, thirteen feet wide and thirteen feet deep; and many little orchards around the houses, generally separated from one another by small, swiftly-flowing streams, tributaries of the main river, were organized in a series of independent defensive positions, each bristling with machine guns.

Brigadier Lloyd had decided that a surprise attack under cover of darkness offered the best chance of forcing this strong position. The assault would be delivered by his two Indian battalions while the Free French moved forward on the right, covered on their outer flank by Collet's cavalry.

In the darkness of Saturday night the Indians moved up to their start-line in lorries, and long before it was light on the following morning the Punjab battalion began to creep silently forward to the attack. There had been no preliminary bombardment, and the defenders were taken unawares. With improvised scaling ladders

<sup>1</sup> Map 6.



the Indians crossed the tank ditch and broke into the village to find that a battalion relief was in progress. If this relief almost doubled the number of our opponents, it also created considerable confusion which was all to our advantage. As was to be expected there was brisk fighting among the gardens and orchards, and for some time after daybreak snipers were still being hunted out from the houses and trees, but by half-past eight in the morning the village was reported clear. A number of the defenders had been captured hiding in the streams up to their necks in water.

It was a remarkable achievement, this capture of a strongly defended position by frontal assault without artillery bombardment.

For the attack against Tel Kissoue and the line of hills behind the village the Rajputana Rifles had orders to pass through the Punjab battalion. There could, of course, be no question of a second surprise, and as early as 5.15 a.m. the supporting artillery of the brigade had begun to range on the ridge. At nine o'clock the Rifles went in to the attack, and within an hour and a half they had stormed Tel Kissoue.

Then it was the turn of the Free French. Cazeau's brigade broke on to Jebel Kelb just to the east of the position taken by the Rifles. Here too it appeared that the defenders were actually caught in the process of carrying out a singularly ill-timed relief.

So far all had gone swimmingly, and Brigadier Lloyd could well feel proud of the achievements of his troops who had won from a captured Vichy officer unstinted praise: *'Ce que vous avez fait, c'est incroyable. Vos Indiens sont vraiment formidables.'*

Unfortunately Collet, moving forward on the right flank with his Circassian horsemen and a number of light tanks, had found the going very difficult. He had no supporting artillery or air cover, and after being subjected to heavy bombardment was compelled to fall back to the position from which he had started, losing five tanks through mechanical breakdowns and three more through enemy fire, while a number of his horses were killed, or lamed on the rough basalt rock. There appeared little prospect that he would be able to get forward and effect any kind of turning movement without the assistance of close support bombing from the air.

At the same time the Indian troops on Tel Kissoue were counter-attacked. At first tanks were employed, and when these had twice failed Vichy had recourse to more spectacular, though much less effective, tactics. A trumpet sounded, and from behind the shelter of a covering ridge a squadron of Spahi horsemen wheeled out and came forward at the gallop. It was gallant, it was picturesque, and it was quite futile. Men on horseback are such an easy target for men

with automatic weapons, and the unfortunate Spahis began to fall fast before our fire. The squadron turned and rode for cover.

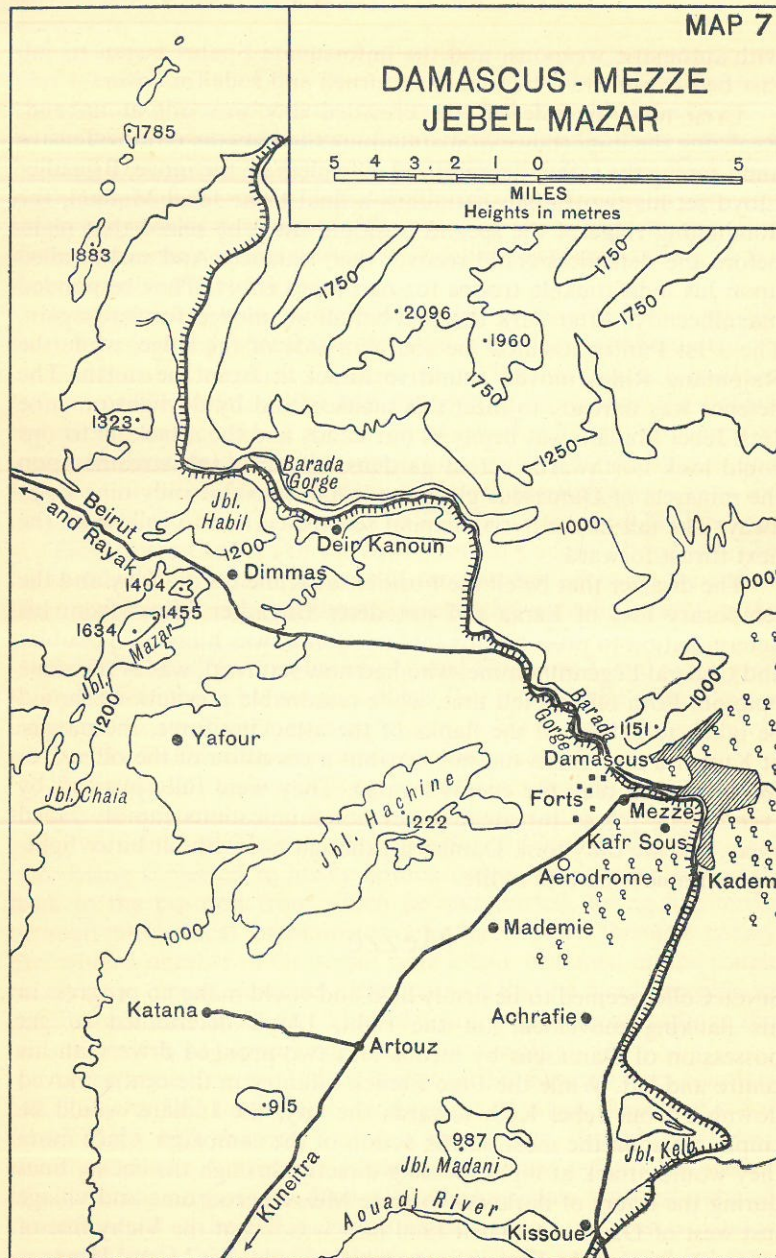
Even now the tale of this crowded day was not at an end. Realizing the importance of maintaining the impetus of his offensive and keeping the rather demoralized defenders on the move, Brigadier Lloyd set his two Indian battalions a final task: Jebel Madani, the dominating ridge of the second position, must be seized that night before the defenders could recover their balance. And so he called upon his indefatigable troops for one more effort. They responded magnificently. After dark the two battalions moved forward again. The 3/1st Punjab assailed the southern side of the ridge, while the Rajputana Rifles moved round to attack it from the north. The defence was unready to meet this menace, and by daylight on June 16th Jebel Madani was firmly in our hands and the attacking troops could look northwards across gardens, orchards and streams upon the minarets of Damascus gleaming in the sunshine only nine miles away. The fall of the Syrian capital seemed certain to follow on the next thrust forward.

The disaster that befell the Fusiliers at Kuneitra that day and the temporary loss of Ezraa did not deter Brigadier Lloyd from his determination to press his advance as soon as was humanly possible; and General Legentilhomme, who had now returned, was of the same opinion. Both officers felt that, while reasonable precautions should be taken to safeguard the flanks of the attacking force, the danger at Kuneitra and Ezraa did not warrant a cessation of the offensive: to halt would play the enemy's game. They were fully justified by events. The forces threatening our communications rapidly faded away, and we duly took Damascus, though not without bitter fighting and much sad loss of life.

## Mezze

SINCE Collet seemed to be firmly held and could make no progress in his flanking movement on the right, Lloyd determined to get possession of Damascus by means of a two-pronged drive with his centre and left. While the Free French infantry in the centre moved downhill from Jebel Kelb towards the city, the Indians would be employed upon the most daring action of the campaign. Once more they would attack at night, passing directly through the enemy lines during the hours of darkness to seize Mezze aerodrome and village just west of Damascus. Their final task was to cut the Vichy line of retreat by way of the Barada gorge which divides the Mount Hermon





mass from the main Anti-Lebanon range. Through the gorge runs the road and railway linking Damascus with Rayak and Beirut.

With all this accomplished the envelopment of Damascus might be expected to present little difficulty, but the plan was a hazardous one. To force a passage by surprise at night through a hostile position demands a rare degree of boldness and discipline; the capture of Mezzé would not put out of action the Vichy artillery firing from the heights above Katana; and the field-works or forts—there were seven of them, each named after a distinguished French soldier—guarding the entrance to the Barada gorge might prove formidable. It was not to be expected that Vichy would lightly relinquish road and rail communications of such importance. Nevertheless, a sudden and striking success at the outset might disorganize the whole defence, and it was considered that the prospective gains were worth the risk.

As a preliminary movement the Indian battalions descended into the plain from Jebel Madani and occupied the village of Artouz on the main road from Kuneitra to Damascus. Two companies of French marine infantry were posted here to turn the village into a tank-proof locality, a measure which, by its defensive character, would help to conceal the true nature of our plan. Meanwhile the troops who were to undertake the attack were rested, so far as rest could be obtained in these exposed forward positions subject to sporadic attacks from Vichy aircraft, and preparations were made to deliver the assault on the night of June 18th/19th. With the exception of one Punjab company, left to hold Jebel Madani, both Indian battalions were employed upon the venture. Other reserves were scanty. There were the French marine infantry at Artouz and one company of the Fusiliers which, detached from the main body, had not been engaged at Kuneitra.

The road leading back to Kuneitra was not yet secured, for the 2nd Queen's which was expected to move forward had received no orders. Katana, four miles west of Artouz, was still in enemy possession.

Lieutenant-Colonel L. B. Jones of the 4/6th Rajputana Rifles commanded the column which formed up south of Artouz and, at half-past eight on the evening of June 18th, moved forward on the left of the Mezzé road. One company of the Punjab battalion had orders to clear the enemy from the village of Mademie; the main advance was led by another Punjab company followed by battalion headquarters, brigade headquarters, and the Rajputana Rifles, with a section of an Indian field company. Another Punjab company formed the rearguard.



Half an hour before midnight, heavy firing from the woods about Mademie showed that the attack had gone in against the defenders of the village: the main column could see the tracer-bullets of the Vichy machine guns and the bursts of hand-grenades. Then the column itself encountered resistance from scattered machine-gun posts, and some confusion resulted. The detachment of sappers lost touch, as did the Punjab company in rear. Worse still, the transport carrying the anti-tank guns, reserve ammunition, land-mines, tools, food and water had gone astray. This convoy of vehicles had, by some error not now to be explained, kept to the road instead of following the fighting troops and, being heavily fired on, was brought to a halt.

Colonel Jones pushed on. At 4.40 a.m. on June 19th his attack went in against Mezze and brought a quick success. The leading troops rushed some anti-tank guns at the entrance to the village and all resistance was soon quelled by bayonet and grenade. Forty prisoners were taken. A company of the Rifles then pushed on as far as the Beirut road and railway, blocking the road and turning back a train. Nearby a petrol dump was found and set on fire. The enemy in this quarter seemed panic stricken and disposed to withdraw altogether.

Meanwhile the transport vehicles, the sappers, and the two companies of the 3/1st Punjab which had lost contact with the main column were rallied and reorganized. At about two o'clock on the morning of the 19th this force pressed ahead up the Mezze road, hoping to join the rest of the brigade in Mezze. A road-block of motor vehicles was cleared and some prisoners taken and at 4 a.m. a machine-gun post at the aerodrome was engaged and dispersed. The advance was continued along the hillsides on the left of the road, and no more resistance was encountered until the leading troops approached the nearest field-work. This was taken without much trouble and, further ahead, the enemy appeared to be leaving the next fort; but a storm of artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire soon compelled a general withdrawal of our men across the road to the shelter of the woods around Kafr Sous. Not far from Kafr Sous a defensive position 'affording cover from tanks and aircraft' was taken up, and patrols made repeated efforts, but all in vain, to establish contact with Colonel Jones in Mezze, whence came the sounds of fighting. By 11 a.m., however, the force was in radio communication with rear brigade headquarters on Jebel Madani.

After the return of General Legentilhomme, Brigadier Lloyd had resumed command of his own brigade. He had received no news

from Mezze but decided to reinforce the position near Kafr Sous. Of the troops at hand Cazeau's Free French brigade were no further forward than the northern end of Jebel Kelb and did not seem disposed to make another effort. There remained the reserve company of the 3/1st Punjab on Jebel Madani and two companies of French marine infantry and a company of Royal Fusiliers in and about Artouz. These troops—the equivalent of a weak battalion—with a battery of 25-pdrs. and two anti-tank guns were placed under the command of Major Burke, 1st Field Regiment, for the fresh advance. Burke's force reached the Kafr Sous position after nightfall without difficulty, for the Mezze road to a point beyond the aerodrome was clear of the enemy.

By this time a priceless opportunity had passed away. If, on the morning of June 19th, after we had captured Mezze, another battalion had been on the spot to exploit the success Damascus might have been ours at little cost and an Indian tragedy averted.

The Rajputana and Punjab battalions, isolated in Mezze without anti-tank guns, tanks or artillery, and lacking their reserves of ammunition, medical supplies and rations (which were actually no more than two miles distant) were obliged to bear the full weight of a determined Vichy counter-attack. They constructed road-blocks across the approaches to the village with timber, stores and wire—wholly inadequate improvisations but the best that could be done in the absence of proper tools and engineer material. Each company prepared a particular locality for defence. Brigade headquarters and the headquarters of the two battalions were established in a large square two-storey building known as Mezze House.

This house provided certain advantages for a force which aimed at making a 'backs-to-the-wall' resistance. From three sides it could only be approached by steep gullies, and its garden, thick with trees and dense undergrowth, was enclosed by a high stone wall. The previous occupant of the house, whoever he may have been, had kept a good cellar. Now the riches of Burgundy, Bordeaux and Moselle were poured away so that the bottles might be filled with petrol and converted into 'Molotov cocktails' with which to meet the coming assault.

At nine o'clock on the morning of the 19th the Vichy tanks, supported by a battalion of *Chasseurs d'Afrique*, began to move down the road to attack Mezze. The company of Rajputana Rifles which had been thrown forward to the Beirut road was driven back and retired in good order into the village. The tanks were clearly going to be masters of the situation, and they set about their task



in methodical fashion. One by one they reduced our isolated defended positions, and their cordon closed ever more tightly round the village. The accurate fire of the Indian troops kept the attacking infantry at a respectful distance, but there was no effective means of dealing with the tanks which blasted in doorways and fired at point-blank range through windows.

At times the tanks would draw off to allow the Vichy artillery an opportunity of shelling the village over open sights. Then the armour would close in again.

About 4 p.m. a company of the Rifles which had run out of ammunition was compelled to surrender, and the tanks began to concentrate upon Mezze House. The garden wall proved a formidable obstacle, but from a distance of some 200 yards gun-fire was directed upon the barricade erected to cover the entrance to the drive. It began to look as though resistance could not be maintained for very much longer.

Inside the building and in the small area of garden were crowded the remnants of two fine Indian battalions, a number of wounded and about fifty prisoners. Ammunition was running low, medical supplies were exhausted, and the only food available was a little fruit which had been collected from the trees in the orchard outside. All the bedding in the house had been torn to pieces to provide bandages, for the number of wounded increased at an alarming rate, though men returned to their positions two and three times after having received a rough field dressing. And still the French failed to close and destroy this last stubborn core of resistance, and the defenders braced themselves in the crumbling house to face the fortunes of the night.

As daylight was departing Colonel Jones decided to send runners back to rear brigade headquarters carrying news of the plight of the garrison. It was a desperate chance. He selected a British sapper subaltern, a Free French liaison officer and a Rajput *jemadar*, and at 8.45 in the evening these three stole out of the house. They had many miles to cover, nearly all of it over ground held or dominated by the enemy.

The three men crept through a hole in the wall and dodging round a tank which was firing at the house, swam a stream beyond, crept through a garden, crossed a lane immediately behind another tank and clambered on to the low roof of a house.

So far all had gone well and they were nearly clear of Mezze which represented the most dangerous part of their journey. They made their way from roof to roof, but in jumping down the *jemadar*

hurt his ankle. The other two helped him along, but the pace was inevitably slowed down, and presently they ran slap into a Vichy post.

The sentry fired point-blank and missed, and in the ensuing confusion they succeeded in breaking clear and covering their traces by doubling back. After scrambling over a succession of walls they found themselves outside the village and were able to take a much-needed breather and watch yet another attack go in against Mezze House.

It was important to keep clear of the road, and so they took a course through the woods and dense undergrowth to the east, their clothes and bodies shredded and lacerated by the cactus through which they had to force a way. All night they travelled and at five o'clock in the morning of the 20th, staggering and blind with fatigue, they reached their destination, rear brigade headquarters on the ridge north of Kissoue.

Brigadier Lloyd acted at once upon the report thus brought from Mezze. He now had at his disposal the 2/3rd Australian Battalion<sup>1</sup> which, on General Wilson's orders, had been hurried up from Palestine by road and rail, but the best chance of saving the Indian battalions seemed to be for Burke to advance without delay from the position near Kafr Sous. He was ordered to do so, and about 7 a.m. on the 20th he moved two Punjab companies out of the woods and across the road to attack the forts upon the hills above. Despite heavy shelling from the north-west—the fire of the Vichy batteries on Jebel Hachine was directed by observation posts in the forts—two more forts were occupied and, by three in the afternoon, some adjacent prison buildings also.

Meanwhile the rest of Burke's force was making for Mezze. Progress, in the face of heavy fire, was slow at first. Then the field battery, making a bold and spectacular advance by bounds along the road, blasted a way through the Vichy defences and enabled the village to be occupied at small cost in the early evening. Burke's infantrymen stumbled forward through the ruins towards the house on the northern outskirts. They reached the building. It was silent and deserted. The battered garden wall, the torn gap in the masonry of the house, the motionless bodies without and within told their story. Relief had come too late.

All through the previous night, all through the morning of that day the defenders had held their own. They dared not waste a round of ammunition. Once the attackers arrived within grenade-throwing

<sup>1</sup> The 2/3rd Battalion was weak in numbers, and had not fully recuperated from the ordeals of Greece and Crete.



distance of the house and even lobbed their missiles into an upper room where Colonel Jones was holding a conference. Then, at this close range, the deadly fire of the Indian troops prevailed and the intruders—those who survived—fled from the scene.

Early in the afternoon the French withdrew their infantry in order to allow their field guns to carry out an intensive bombardment of the house. Part of the roof collapsed, as did the floor of the room in which the wounded were crowded: dead, living and dying were buried in the débris. Taking advantage of this confusion infantry broke into the garden once more. Once more they were driven back.

And then was heard the sound of Burke's force fighting its way forward. But in the house at Mezze there was hardly a round of ammunition left. Relief was near, but how could the defenders hold out until it arrived? Colonel Jones had one card left to play. If he could temporize and prevent a surrender for another hour or two his gallant remnant might yet be saved. He decided to ask for a temporary armistice for the purpose of burying the dead and removing the wounded. Once an armistice were granted surely it would be possible to spin out the time until Burke broke through.

The plan failed only by accident. Directly a captured Vichy officer went out with a white flag to convey Colonel Jones's message to the Vichy commander the besiegers assumed that surrender was intended and rushed in, overpowering the survivors of the garrison few of whom were without a wound. Lieutenant-Colonel H. E. Greatwood, commanding the 3/1st Punjab Regiment, had been mortally hit. He died in Damascus on June 22nd.

## Damascus and After

THE sacrifice of the Indian troops at Mezze was not altogether in vain, for the Vichy defence was shaken and a continuation of our attacks was soon to bring the expected reward. By dusk the 2/3rd Australian Battalion had arrived upon the scene, following orders from Brigadier Lloyd to complete the capture of the forts upon the hills and to cut the Beirut road and railway in the gorge beyond. Also, Cazeau's Free French moved from Jebel Kelb at 5.30 p.m., being assisted forward by Gordon's company of the 2/3rd Australian Machine-Gun Battalion which had been sent up from Kuneitra. This advance encountered little resistance but halted short of the village of Achrafie that night.

Before darkness fell the R.A.F. were bombing Vichy transport on

the Beirut road and *Groupement Collet* had crossed the River Aouadj and was approaching Damascus from the south-east.

The main achievement of the 2/3rd Australian Battalion during the night was the cutting of the Beirut road in the Barada gorge. Telephone poles were felled and used by the Australians to block the way; and, the enemy being taken by surprise, an embarrassing number of prisoners and vehicles were captured. Among the field-works on the hills above, confused encounters in the darkness had not resulted so well. One fort was found to be deserted. Another, though won, was lost by counter-attack, and the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel D. J. Lamb, wounded and a prisoner, was taken with some men of the battalion to yet another.

On the morning of the 21st the Vichy forces seemed disposed to give up the struggle. With little artillery assistance the Australians attacked and secured the surrender of the remaining forts and released Colonel Lamb and the other prisoners. In the Barada gorge attacks of tanks and armoured cars from both east and west had been repulsed by the Australians. North of Mezze Burke had repulsed an attack at dawn by a battalion of Colonial infantry which, it appears, was delivered in order to help the Vichy rearguards to disengage. By 11 a.m. the fighting had died down, but the R.A.F. were still smiting Vichy vehicles on the Beirut road.

General Wilson was extremely reluctant to take any action which might involve fighting through the streets of Damascus with consequent damage to an ancient and venerated city, traditionally the oldest inhabited city in the world, the city set in gardens on the edge of the desert. He had therefore despatched an appeal to General Dentz by radio on June 18th requesting him to declare it an open town, and asked for a reply by 5.30 a.m. on the following morning. Dentz delayed his reply and then refused the request. Perhaps he was not at all averse from a bombardment for which the odium would rest upon the British and Free French forces; but wiser counsels subsequently prevailed. On the morning of June 21st, while it was still possible for them to do so, the Vichy forces evacuated Damascus and the inhabitants prepared to receive the Allies.

Cazeau's Free French, still supported by Gordon's Australian machine-gunners, were the nearest troops to the city. They had resumed their advance, and after a skirmish with departing Vichy troops at Kadem railway station were approached by representatives of the civil authorities in cars displaying the white flag. In this fashion Colonel Cazeau, and Colonel Blackburn, commanding the Austra-



lian machine-gun battalion, received the surrender of the city. They were conducted into Damascus and entertained at luncheon; later Collet and his Circassians arrived. General Legentilhomme made his formal entry at 4 p.m.

The fall of Damascus after rather less than two weeks' fighting was an important achievement from the moral and political point of view, and marked a definite stage in the occupation of Syria and the Lebanon. But the *réclame* attaching to the event was completely obliterated by the news which broke upon the world a few hours later. On the morning of Sunday, June 22nd, the German armies crossed the frontier into Russia on a 1,500-mile front, and the war entered upon a new phase of vast and far-reaching significance. Syria, after occupying almost the centre of the strategic map, became on that Sunday in June merely the *locale* of a minor and not very edifying squabble between two former allies. For the time being, at least, Merjayoun and Kuneitra, Damascus and Beirut appeared to lose much of their significance as the German armies rolled forward towards Kiev and Leningrad, Murmansk and Moscow.

What followed in the Damascus sector was in the nature of an anti-climax. De Verdilhac had extricated his forces in time. He withdrew them mostly in a north-westerly direction along the road towards Rayak, and few prisoners fell into our hands. Moving north-eastward the Free French made considerable progress, for no serious attempt was made to oppose them. By June 25th they were forty miles up the road to Homs, and on June 28th they advanced a further twenty miles. On the last two days of the month they were obliged to repel counter-attacks made by Vichy troops with heavy tanks and armoured cars, and thanks to the support given by our 25-pdrs. and anti-tank guns they held their own. But no decisive success could be gained in this quarter, for problems of supply prevented the continuance of the Free French advance to Homs. In any case our chief objective remained the Vichy seat of government—Beirut—although we were not yet ready to resume our thrust along the coast. And our position west of Damascus could not yet be regarded as secure.

The Vichy counterstroke had hastened the reinforcement of the Allied troops already engaged, and before Damascus was captured a considerable reorganization had taken place. On June 18th the First Australian Corps was formed under General Lavarack, whose command embraced the whole front from Damascus to the sea, and now received the 16th Brigade (Brigadier C. E. N. Lomax) of the

British 6th Division which had been hastily assembled and was by no means well equipped. Later, more Australian troops were to come.

Major-General J. F. Evetts, commanding the 6th Division, assumed responsibility under Lavarack for the Damascus-Kuneitra sector on June 19th when the fate of the city was still undecided. He had at his disposal no great accession of strength, for the remnants of the gallant Indian brigade sufficed but to form one composite battalion; and although he had the 2nd Queen's and 2nd Leicestershire of his own 16th Brigade, the third battalion (2nd King's Own) had been allotted to the Australian front. Next day, June 20th, Lavarack lent him the 2/3rd and 2/5th Australian Battalions until Damascus should be entered. As we know, the 2/3rd Battalion played a valiant part in the capture of the city.

In addition Gordon's company of the 2/3rd Australian Machine-Gun Battalion was still available, and a platoon of this company was attached to each of the British battalions.

The enthusiastic General Legentilhomme believed that Evetts was strong enough to thrust a way through to Rayak while his own Free Frenchmen continued the advance due north in the direction of Homs. The British commander was much less optimistic; rather he felt that the immediate need was to clear his communications, guard against attacks and sabotage by local marauders, and ensure quiet and order in Damascus.

Evetts now moved the Queen's and Leicestershire out to the west to clear the heights overlooking his supply route from Palestine. On the night of June 22nd/23rd the Queen's, entering the village of Katana where resistance had been expected, found nine abandoned French tanks and three armoured cars, all immobilized through lack of petrol. This was promising, and the Leicestershires, on the right, found Jebel Hachine clear of the enemy. The immediate defensive precautions to protect the supply line to Damascus had now been taken, and late on the evening of June 23rd the road from Palestine via Kuneitra to Damascus was declared open for transport.

The 2/3rd Australian Battalion was astride the Damascus-Rayak-Beirut road in the Barada gorge and had pushed patrols well forward, while preparing to link up with the right of the Leicestershire. But south-west of the road lay the formidable barrier of Jebel Mazar.

Jebel Mazar was the almost perfect defensive position. Very steep on the side that faced an enemy advancing from Damascus, it presented the defender with a magnificent field of fire, while the attacker must scramble up slopes bare of cover and exposed to



constant observation from above. Nor did the configuration of the country offer any prospect of a turning movement on either flank. It was a position which, as the commander of the Australian machine-gun battalion, himself the wearer of the Victoria Cross, grimly remarked, a single battalion adequately munitioned could hold against the whole world. And Vichy had had just sufficient respite to man the position.

On the 24th June General Evetts moved his headquarters into Damascus. He had received orders to use his own division—really only a few battalions were at his disposal—for an advance to the Zahle area with the object of securing Rayak airfield and cutting off the Vichy forces at Merjayoun. The Free French, who were charged with the protection of Damascus, were to advance on Homs after Evetts had occupied Rayak.

The 2/3rd Australian Battalion on the Beirut road had been heavily shelled, and had fought an engagement with Vichy tanks before being withdrawn. The attack on this day, the 24th, was made by the Leicestershire and the Queen's, the former battalion moving north-westward towards the railway at Deir Kanoun, the latter, on the left, aiming to reach the road with its outer flank directed upon Yafour village. From the outset the two battalions were enfiladed by continuous and accurate shelling directed by observation posts on Jebel Chaia and Jebel Mazar. While the Vichy guns were hard to locate, our own batteries could only come into action at effective range by occupying exposed positions.

The Leicestershire met with varying fortune. They reached the road, were thrown back by a counter-attack of armoured cars, and then rallied and pressed on to Deir Kanoun. Eventually, owing to difficulties of supply, they were obliged to relinquish the ground they had won. The Queen's, on the left, never succeeded in making much headway.

## CHAPTER V

# TOWARDS THE INEVITABLE

## No Easy Way

WHILE the Indians, Australians and Free French were covering the last mile to Damascus on the morning of Saturday, June 21st, far away to the east a mobile British force was crossing the frontier from Iraq.<sup>1</sup> 'Habforce', which had marched from the Palestine coast to Baghdad to quell the Iraqi rising, was now moving west to strike in upon the open desert flank of the Vichy forces in Syria. The objective was Palmyra, the ancient desert capital of Zenobia, who under the magnificent title of Queen of the East had defied the Imperial might of Aurelian sixteen hundred years before.

As early as June 13th General Wavell had instructed Major-General Clark, commander of Habforce, to prepare to advance into Syria, occupy Palmyra and cut the Vichy communications between Damascus and Homs. Unfortunately General Clark's force had been widely scattered through the necessity of sending flying detachments to show the flag and restore order at various points of northern and western Iraq; so some days were needed to hand over these posts to the 10th Indian Division from Basra and concentrate the troops. But by June 17th the spearhead under Brigadier Kingstone was assembled at H3, the desert post on the pipeline west of Rutba, where it had halted a month earlier on the first stage of its march across Iraq to Habbaniya, Falluja and Baghdad. It now consisted of the headquarters of the 4th Cavalry Brigade, the Household Cavalry Regiment, Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry (less one squadron), Warwickshire Yeomanry (less one squadron), a battery of field artillery (less two troops), an Australian anti-tank battery (less one troop), part of a Field troop R.E., four troops of the Arab Legion and nine R.A.F. armoured cars.

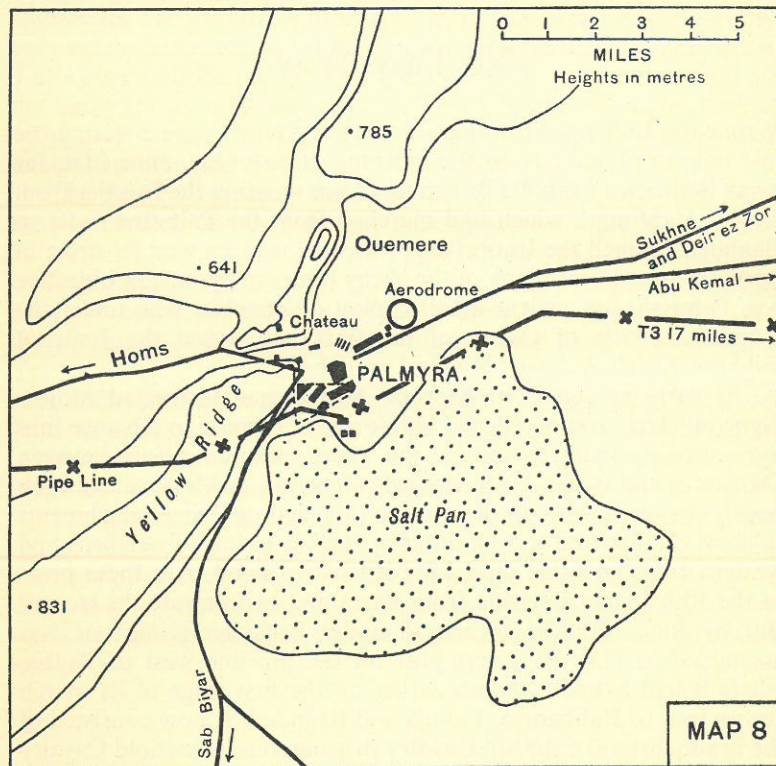
The plan was to occupy Palmyra by a *coup de main*, 'Kingcol' (Brigadier Kingstone's vanguard) racing over the frontier in the

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.



hours of darkness and reaching the desert oasis, a full 150 miles distant, by about 7 a.m. It was hoped that Palmyra would be in our hands by mid-morning, whereupon the remainder of the division would move in and mobile columns would thrust westwards to create confusion on the French lines of communication between Homs and Damascus.

In order to mask our intention, the detachment of Household



Cavalry under Major Merry, which had pursued our old enemy Fawzi Qawukji into Syrian territory at Abu Kemal on the Euphrates, was to remain in position there and develop an elaborate 'cover plan' to suggest that our real objective was Deir ez Zor further up the Euphrates. By means of wireless messages despatched in clear, by false reports and convenient B.B.C. 'indiscretions', the fiction of an advance to Deir ez Zor was well sustained, while the true striking

force was assembling for its sudden blow at Palmyra much further west.

The oasis of Palmyra, a halting place during full thirty centuries for caravans passing between the cities of Mesopotamia and the Phoenician coast, was by no means ill-placed for defence, despite its isolated desert position. To the south and east it was largely covered by a salt marsh which turned to a lake in the rainy season and was at all times impassable to heavy vehicles. To the south-west, north-west and north rose high rocky ridges giving dominant views over the flat desert by which any invader from the east must approach. An old medieval fortress, known simply as The Chateau, covered the oasis from the north, and a wall eighteen feet high enclosing a palm-grove formed a further obstacle on the southern edge. The massive masonry and fallen columns of the Roman city were admirably suited to provide snipers' nests and defensive positions, and the two companies of the Foreign Legion, and the Light Desert company who together garrisoned the place, had worked at wire and anti-tank defences. It was hardly likely that we should get Palmyra without a fight.

Furthermore, the column moving across the open desert would be at the mercy of hostile air reconnaissance and subsequently of air attack; and for its own protection it depended upon capturing the airfield at Palmyra itself. The nearest airfield in our hands was Mezze, just outside Damascus, and it would certainly be some days before a base for our fighters could be established there. The advance on Palmyra, like so many of our ventures at this time was therefore in the nature of a gamble. Everything seemed to depend upon a swift seizure of the oasis and airfield.

Kingcol started off from H3 before dusk on the evening of June 20th, though the main part of the 150-mile drive was to be accomplished in the small hours of the following morning after a pause to give the troops some sleep. The Wiltshire Yeomanry led the way. They were to approach Palmyra from the south, skirting the saltpan and seizing in succession Yellow Ridge (the line of hills immediately behind Palmyra) and the Chateau. From this point they would give covering fire to the Warwickshire Yeomanry who would move across the desert from the east and enter Palmyra on the northern side. The R.A.F. armoured cars and the Arab Legion in their trucks screened the advance.

First contact with the enemy was made by Glubb's Arabs who captured the majority of a chain of piquets about thirty miles south and south-east of Palmyra. But soon afterwards all hope of a surprise



vanished. The presence of our columns had been reported and Vichy bombers began to come into action. Under persistent air attack the Wiltshire Yeomanry pressed on, though some of their vehicles were hit and burnt out. At 1 p.m. the leading squadron was approaching the south-western edge of Palmyra when accurate machine-gun fire from the gardens and plantations checked the advance. Later in the day the Wiltshire Yeomanry made another effort and succeeded in getting patrols on to Yellow Ridge.

Meanwhile Kingstone had pushed on with the rest of his force, hoping to gain the T3 pumping station which is over twenty miles east of Palmyra.<sup>1</sup> He was brought to a halt by repeated air attacks, and although our 25-pdrs. shelled the defences of T3 no harm seemed to result. General Clark, with the rest of Habforce had crossed into Syria during the morning and followed on in this direction.

It is doubtful if the presence of the Household Cavalry at Abu Kemal had led the enemy to believe, even for a time, that the advance of Habforce would be made up the Euphrates. The detachment was now moving westward, 'to join Habforce at Palmyra', but found pumping station T2 held by the Foreign Legion who refused an invitation to surrender. One squadron was left in observation until the defenders changed their minds which they did in the course of the afternoon. Nine aircraft attacked the Household Cavalry as they pressed on towards T3 and a number of vehicles were lost.

When General Clark visited his forward troops on the morning of June 22nd the prospect was anything but pleasing. The Wiltshire Yeomanry held a precarious position on and near Yellow Ridge away to the west; the Household Cavalry, on approaching T3 from the east, had summoned the place to surrender and received machine-gun fire in reply; the Warwickshire Yeomanry remained south of T3. Further south was the Essex Regiment, and the whole of Habforce was dispersed in the open desert over a distance of twenty miles exposed to the persistent cannon and machine-gun fire of Vichy aircraft. The enemy appeared to single out staff cars and signal trucks for special attention.

Clark sent to Wilson an urgent request for air protection and support, and, later in the day, half a Gladiator fighter squadron flew in from Palestine to H3, bringing ground staff and all necessary equipment. Unfortunately no facilities existed for the defence of the new landing-ground so the fighters were flown back again, leaving Habforce to continue the unequal struggle as best it could with a

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.

certain number of Bren and Hotchkiss guns mounted on tripods—all the troops possessed in the way of anti-aircraft armament.

Attacks from the air grew heavier on the 23rd and 24th June and supply difficulties arose as vehicles carrying petrol, water, food and ammunition were hit and put out of action. Fawzi Qawukji, with his own contingent reinforced by Vichy armoured cars, lay in wait for supply convoys near T3 and constituted a particular source of annoyance.

In spite of their best endeavours the Warwickshire Yeomanry had not been able to link up with the Wiltshire; and the Household Cavalry, who had been ordered to work round to the north side of Palmyra, found themselves isolated in high rocky ground to the north-west of the place. A troop of the Warwickshire which had been left to 'contain' T3 met with disaster on June 24th when six Vichy armoured cars displaying the white flag appeared from the west. As soon as our men emerged from their shelters to parley, fire was opened on them and twenty-two were killed, wounded or captured.<sup>1</sup> It was on this day that Brigadier Kingstone collapsed, and was removed to hospital.

Against these checks and set-backs could be counted only one raid of Australian Tomahawks upon Palmyra. General Wilson had asked General Clark if the place could be reduced by night attack or dawn attack, or if it could be by-passed to the south in a westward advance. To the commander on the spot none of these courses appeared feasible: he saw little chance of achieving anything or even of preserving his force from destruction if the menace from the air could not be removed.

Although Palmyra had defied our efforts and the advance north-westward from Damascus had been brought to a halt almost as soon as started, we had at least won back what we had lost at Merjayoun.<sup>2</sup>

Until more troops could be concentrated for the resumption of the coastal advance towards Beirut, Merjayoun had become the chief concern of the 7th Australian Division. Patrols of the 2/33rd Battalion discovered on June 21st that the enemy had evacuated Khiam fort during the night, and on the following night Vichy gave up Khiam village. The 2/25th Battalion, which certainly stood in

<sup>1</sup> There is some doubt as to whether this was a deliberate ruse. Vichy armoured car patrols sometimes used a white flag as a recognition signal to their own aircraft.

<sup>2</sup> Map 5.



need of some respite, was drawn back into divisional reserve and the 2nd King's Own—second battalion of the British 16th Brigade to arrive in Syria—was moved from the coastal sector to take its place. Berryman now aimed at securing Ibeles Saki and the high ground in its vicinity from which one of the Vichy supply routes could be brought under fire. The other route was dominated by the Australian batteries around Jezzine.

The new attack went in at dawn on Monday, June 23rd, watched by Wavell and Lavarack, who saw a company of the 2/33rd Battalion take its objective after a sharp encounter with Algerian infantry. The three companies of the King's Own, which were directed upon Ibeles Saki itself, unfortunately lost the barrage and made little ground. However, it was enough. While this action was being fought a patrol of the 2/2nd Pioneers had entered Merjayoun and found it deserted; and next day, June 24th, the King's Own were able to enter Ibeles Saki unopposed. The French had fallen back to the positions they had occupied before the Vichy counterstroke.

Fighting at Jezzine had never really died down. On June 19th the Vichy snipers were particularly active and next day, when Blenheim bombers attacked and damaged a number of transport vehicles on the road leading northward, the French mortars bombarded the Australian positions. On the 21st Brigadier Cox planned an attack from the east against two heights which commanded the Niha road north of Jezzine, but this operation, owing to a misunderstanding with regard to artillery support, was postponed until the early hours of the 23rd when the morning fog hampered the assembly of the 2/14th Battalion. A company of the 2/31st which reached one of the objectives unopposed was withdrawn in face of heavy counter-attack. Nothing more was attempted until the morning of the 24th, when two companies of the 2/14th had a somewhat similar experience. In the afternoon of this day Brigadier Plant arrived to relieve Brigadier Cox in command of a force much depleted in numbers and very very tired.

As will presently be seen the Australian effort at Jezzine had a very definite purpose, for it was to link up with the main advance on Beirut.<sup>1</sup> The Australians on the coast had not been idle. Pushing forward north of Sidon patrols of the 21st Brigade reached the lateral road leading inland to Rharife on June 19th, this entry into wild mountain country where no vehicle could move bringing into use, as the only means of supply, pack-trains formed of captured mules.

On the 20th the 6th Division cavalry squadron, which had been

<sup>1</sup> Map 3.

relieved by the squadron of 9th Division cavalry, returned to the fray equipped with four 11-ton captured tanks.

Spanish deserters who came over from the Foreign Legion brought valuable information regarding the defences of the Damour river line, but there was little co-operation forthcoming from the inhabitants of the country. The presence of enemy agents was to be expected; even so the prevalence of such hostile acts as signalling information to the Vichy forces, stealing telephone wire, and firing upon passing vehicles seemed to indicate a general hatred of the occupying troops.

On June 22nd Major-General Allen held a divisional conference at which the commanders of the 21st and 25th Brigades urged that an extra brigade was needed for the advance on Beirut—that is to say that the 7th Australian Division should be brought up to its proper establishment of three brigades. The shortage of mortar and anti-tank rifle ammunition was mentioned, and the brigadiers also pointed out that battery positions were in sore need of protection from air attack.

## Success in the East

LET us now return to the eastern desert where Habforce, under persistent air attack, was stayed on the threshold of Palmyra.<sup>1</sup> The ordeal was not to last so much longer, for after the 24th June the Vichy airmen seemed to relax their efforts. On the 26th, too, the Wiltshire Yeomanry contrived to get a few men on to Yellow Ridge.

Glubb's invaluable Arab Legion was scouring the desert in every direction. Sab Biyar (Seven Wells), sixty miles south-west of Palmyra, was occupied without opposition, enabling Habforce to shift its base further west and south: from H3 in Iraq to H4 in Transjordan. A shorter, safer and more convenient line of supply was thus assured.

On the 27th a company of the 1st Essex with a section of 25-pdrs. relieved the Household Cavalry in the Oumere hills on the northern side of Palmyra; at night the Yeomanry captured a machine-gun post on Yellow Ridge. The promise of bomber support, and also fighter support at two hours' notice, was heartening news to the desert column; and next day when R.A.F. bombers were seen to be attacking Palmyra, the fighter escort of Australian Tomahawks shot down six Vichy aircraft in full view of the troops.

<sup>1</sup> Map 8.



The persevering Yeomanry now managed to occupy most of Yellow Ridge in spite of stout opposition. On the north-western side of Palmyra the Essex captured the Chateau, a feat made possible by the daring night reconnaissance of a subaltern. A few prisoners were secured in this affair.

Palmyra was now almost within our grasp—or so it seemed. Then on the 29th June a counter-attack supported by accurate machine-gun and mortar fire drove our men off Yellow Ridge. At night an attempt to recapture it failed against heavy fire of all arms, but one squadron—all squadrons were pitifully weak in numbers—of the Wiltshire maintained a precarious footing in the gardens on the south-western side of Palmyra. There was little pause in what had become a 'soldier's battle' amid the groves and the massive ruins of the old Roman city. On the night of June 30th the defenders sullenly withdrew to an inner perimeter where they showed no intention of surrender. We had not enough men to make an end of it, for the fighting strength of the Wiltshire Yeomanry was down to thirty-six and the Essex who were now bearing the brunt of the battle were much too thin on the ground. And each side was half expecting to be attacked by a relieving force; for if the Vichy defenders believed that at any time a fresh motorized division might fall upon them from out of the desert, our own men who had little means of knowing what was going on in the rest of Syria, thought that they might well be attacked by a Vichy column from Homs.

On the 1st July the Arab Legion won a little victory east of Sukhne, which lies in a gap in the hills on the road to Deir ez Zor.<sup>1</sup> Seeing a Vichy detachment advancing out of the desert, five of Glubb's impatient warriors called upon their fellows to follow and rushed upon the foe, an 'enthusiastic and most unorthodox action' which caused the utter rout of the enemy. Nearly seventy prisoners with six armoured cars, two trucks and twelve machine guns were gathered in at a cost of one man killed and one wounded.

At Palmyra, in the dawn of July 3rd, the end came. Emissaries were brought to Lieutenant-Colonel Nichols, commanding the Essex, with the information that the garrison was willing to surrender. After the necessary preliminaries had been observed our troops marched in. The force that laid down its arms that afternoon consisted of six French officers and eighty-seven Foreign Legionaries (nearly all Russians and Germans by birth), forty-eight members of the ground staff of the aerodrome and twenty-four of the Light Desert company. They had fought with extreme doggedness and

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.

resolution, and when it was all over they proceeded to drown their cares in the familiar manner of Legionaries.

We had taken Palmyra, not in the hoped-for twelve hours but in twelve days, and it had been an exceedingly costly affair. The main reason for this was, of course, our lack of air support both in attack and defence; but even without enemy air intervention it is by no means certain that the *coup de main* would have succeeded. The advance had been made by well-known tracks, and the defenders of Palmyra, though not numerous, were tough and resourceful fighters. It is perhaps significant that prior to the surrender we had only succeeded in taking twenty-one prisoners. However, success had come at last, and as a result all the Vichy airfields in Syria were now within fighter range of the R.A.F.

Next day the twenty-two men of the Foreign Legion who had held T3, thirty miles to the eastward, surrendered. Australian cavalry patrolling up from Damascus were only sixty miles short of Palmyra, and Habforce, which could now be supplied from Damascus, was ready to carry out the second part of its task, raiding the communications on the eastern side of the Vichy 'quadrilateral'.

On July 5th the 4th Cavalry Brigade Group (Kingcol)—commanded since June 29th by Brigadier J. G. E. Tiarks—was concentrated twenty miles west of Palmyra. Patrols had located Vichy troops at Furqlus, forty-five miles to the west and only twenty-two miles short of Homs.

The 10th Indian Division in Iraq had been warned on June 19th that help for the Syrian campaign took precedence over the defence of the Basra area and the protection of the oilfields. At the beginning of July the troops began to move. They could not do so earlier, as forward dumps of petrol and other supplies had first to be established and much transport collected in readiness for the long desert marches which lay ahead.

Abu Kemal, on the Euphrates, had been occupied before the end of June, and on July 1st the 21st Indian Brigade Group (Brigadier C. J. Weld), which had been concentrated there, began to move forward upon Deir ez Zor. The group consisted of the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles, the 2/4th and 2/10th Gurkha Rifles; the 13th Lancers (armoured cars); and the 157th Field Regiment, with the 9th Field Company Sappers and Miners and the necessary signals, medical and supply detachments. No anti-aircraft armament could be provided. Other columns were also making ready to advance: the 20th Indian Brigade Group which was to threaten Deir ez Zor from



the north-east, and the 17th Indian Brigade Group with orders to clear the Syrian portion of the Iraq-Turkey railway in the territory known from its shape as the 'Duck's Bill'.

Weld's force moved in two columns. The main body followed the Euphrates while the Lancers and the Frontier Force Rifles moved first west along the pipe-line and then north across the desert. In order to avoid a repetition of Habforce's experience at Palmyra, General Wilson had obtained the services of four Hurricanes and four Gladiators which would operate from T1 landing-ground about thirty miles short of the Abu Kemal starting point. Nevertheless, the river column was seen and bombed by Vichy aircraft in the course of the day.

By evening the main body had reached a point about nine miles from Deir ez Zor which was held by a battalion of Levant infantry and a Light Desert company supported by considerable artillery. After a day for rest and re-fuelling the attack was opened on the morning of July 3rd. While the river column made a frontal attack the detachment which had kept to the desert cut the Aleppo road five miles beyond Deir ez Zor, a movement which took the Vichy garrison by surprise. Those of the enemy who could do so retreated westwards, but many of the Levantine troops promptly donned civilian garb and mingled inconspicuously with the civilian population. In consequence, only a hundred prisoners were netted by the action—gentlemen who presumably had omitted to supply themselves with alternative suitings or lacked the bargaining power to obtain them.

To round up parties of the enemy among the narrow winding streets with snipers firing from the roof-tops was by no means easy. By the time that the Indian sappers had removed the demolition charges from the bridge over the Euphrates the cars of the Lancers took up the chase beyond the river with little prospect of success.

In Deir ez Zor a large quantity of equipment fell into our hands—five aircraft, nine guns, fifty very useful lorries, a number of machine guns and quantities of ammunition. During the day Vichy aircraft brought down two of our Hurricanes; and the goodwill of the inhabitants, Arabs and Armenians who were inclined to be friendly enough, was tempered by their dislike of the air attacks which our presence had brought upon them.

On July 5th the 2/4th Gurkhas and a squadron of Lancers, with detachments of gunners and sappers, moved up-river to Raqqa which was occupied in peace, no Vichy troops appearing on the scene. From Deir ez Zor also, patrols moved south-eastward, and on

the road to Sukhne were greeted by the Arab Legion. Henceforward touch with Habforce was never lost.

The column provided by the 20th Indian Brigade which was to demonstrate towards Deir ez Zor from Mosul had not been in contact with the enemy. Lieutenant-Colonel F. D. Clarke, with his own battalion, 2/8th Gurkhas, a troop of field guns, some Indian sappers and a few R.A.F. armoured cars had moved south-westward to the frontier and then westward. He had reached the Khabur river as early as July 1st, but returned to Al Badi in Iraq next day.

The 17th Indian Brigade column left Mosul on July 3rd to secure the railway across the 'Duck's Bill'. A small force—two companies of the 1/12th Frontier Force Regiment with a few guns and armoured cars—it proved quite large enough for its purpose. At the frontier railway station of Tel Kotchek Major P. T. Clarke who was in command successfully bluffed the commandant of the Vichy garrison by assuring him that two battalions of infantry and a regiment of artillery were ready to strike. The garrison, probably only too conscious of their remote situation, surrendered at discretion, so three officers and 130 men belonging to the *troupes spéciales* and a considerable quantity of rolling stock fell into our hands. Our infantry then pushed forward along the railway, and at daybreak on July 5th, after a few shots had been fired, secured a Vichy landing-ground and the surrender of thirty men of the local irregular cavalry.

## Jebel Mazar and Merjayoun

DURING these days there was nothing good to report from the front north-west of Damascus where the attempted advance upon Rayak could hardly be said to prosper.<sup>1</sup>

Although Vichy artillery fire was obviously being controlled by posts on Jebel Mazar, it was by no means certain that this feature was occupied in force. On the night of the 24th June a company of the 2/3rd Australian Battalion was therefore sent to scale the ridge, a long and exhausting task. The Australians encountered no opposition, but by daybreak they were still short of the summit and badly needed water.

The two British battalions now tried another advance but made very slow progress over ground swept by artillery fire and soon after mid-day were definitely held up. Considering that their way led across a Vichy artillery practice range the enemy's advantage was

<sup>1</sup> Map 7.



manifest: it was estimated that he had at least thirty-six guns in action.

Meanwhile the Australian company on the near slopes of Jebel Mazar was still striving to get forward, but soon encountered heavy fire which made further progress impossible. At night a fresh company of the 2/3rd Battalion—newly-arrived from guard duties on the coast—was allotted to the Jebel Mazar enterprise and started the climb, but a Syrian guide led the troops astray. When daylight came they were well below the summit, but during the 26th they pushed on, repulsed a Vichy attack, and joined hands with the other company.

On this day General Evetts visited Brigadier Lomax whose two battalions, astride the main road with their right near Deir Kanoun, faced almost due west overlooking the village of Dimmas. Dimmas was reported to be clear of the enemy, but all approaches to Jebel Mazar, where the two Australian companies had established themselves, were under fire. Our casualties had not been heavy but we had suffered considerably from the Vichy counter-battery work: seven of the twenty guns of the 4th Field Regiment had been knocked out. Evetts decided that the Vichy troops were too numerous and too strongly established for the slender forces at his disposal to press their offensive with any prospect of success. He ordered the 16th Brigade to stand firm in its position ready to follow up any Vichy withdrawal. The brigade was to be supplied with 1,000 anti-tank mines and 300 Molotov cocktails, while the provision of twenty-four dummy 25-pdrs. was intended to give the enemy the impression that our artillery had been strongly reinforced.

At night, however, the Australians on Jebel Mazar made another, and this time successful, effort to reach the summit. After repelling a French counter-attack they drove the enemy from three successive positions of which the last commanded a view of the valley beyond. At daylight on the 27th three Vichy batteries, six tanks, and many troops and vehicles were plainly to be seen—all within range of our guns. If only we had been able to open fire on these targets! An artillery observation officer had arrived but did not bring with him up the mountain-side the essential radio equipment: so it proved impossible to establish radio communication with any of our batteries, and the priceless opportunity was missed. During the morning a platoon of the Queen's brought up rations, water and ammunition—all of which were sorely needed. But Vichy had no intention of leaving the Australians in peaceful possession. In the afternoon Senegalese, Moroccan and Colonial infantry delivered a number

of counter-attacks with great persistence, some encounters taking place at hand-grenade range. Then, after the Australians had disdainfully rejected a summons to surrender, the Vichy mortars opened a heavy and accurate bombardment to which we had no adequate reply. As darkness gathered our men, moving in small parties, were obliged to fight their way down to the plain again. Thus we relinquished our precarious hold on Jebel Mazar.

On this day, June 27th, Brigadier Lomax, who considered that there was still a fair chance of success, asked for and obtained permission to try another advance. Support was received from thirteen Blenheims who bombed the Vichy batteries and struck at transport on the roads, but the infantry could accomplish nothing. In the evening General Evetts ordered the brigade to revert to the defensive as he had planned.

At the end of the month the 2/3rd Australian Battalion left for the coast and the 2nd King's Own arrived from Merjayoun to complete the 16th Brigade to which was also attached the marine infantry battalion of Free French.

Now ensued some days of comparative quiet, a rumour, baseless as it proved, that Vichy would attack Damascus on July 4th causing us a considerable expenditure of artillery ammunition.

After re-occupying Merjayoun on June 24th the Australians had pushed ahead in the hope of hustling the enemy out of the Hasbaya-Hasbani position,<sup>1</sup> but the defence proved to be too strong. An attack delivered by the 2/2nd Pioneers on the 27th was no more successful.

Now began the relief of Berryman's force by the British 23rd Brigade (the second brigade of the 6th Division to arrive) which consisted of the 4th Border Regiment, the 1st Durham Light Infantry, and a partially trained Czechoslovak battalion. We had no longer any intention of pressing an advance northward into the Bekaa plain, indeed we hardly possessed the strength to do so, seeing that three Vichy battalions, Foreign Legion, Algerian and Tunisian infantry, with various local levies and several batteries of artillery barred the way.

The 23rd Brigade—it was commanded by Brigadier A. Galloway—completed the relief of the Australian infantry by July 2nd. The Australian gunners remained. Orders were for an active defence, everyone to be ready to follow up in case of an enemy withdrawal.

As the sector now came under the command of General Evetts,

<sup>1</sup> Map 5.



Lavarack's Australian Corps, apart from the Free French north of Damascus, consisted of the 6th Division astride the Damascus-Beirut road (16th Brigade) and north of Merjayoun (23rd Brigade); and the 7th Australian Division which was able to concentrate upon a front of about fifteen miles from Jezzine to the sea. From this area was to be made, without further delay, the advance upon Beirut which was expected to bring Vichy resistance to an end and give the Allies complete control of Syria and the Lebanon.

## Australian Front

THE 7th Australian Division was, in fact, preparing for the attack against the line of the Damour river, reported to be the last organized defensive position in front of Beirut.<sup>1</sup> When the Merjayoun sector had been handed over to the British 6th Division the whole of the 25th Australian Brigade was grouped around Jezzine, and was expected to be of considerable assistance to the advance along the coast. To complete the division as far as infantry was concerned, another brigade came into being. This, the 17th Brigade, was commanded by Brigadier S. G. Savige and consisted of three units which had already been employed in the fighting as and when required: the 2/3rd and 2/5th Battalions, and the 2/2nd Pioneers.

As a preliminary to the main operation Major-General Allen, commanding the division, aimed at relieving the pressure on Jezzine by the advance of a column from the coast into the mountains by the road leading to Rharife and thence northward to Beit ed Dine. At this important road-centre the coastal force and the Jezzine force would eventually meet. The 2/25th Battalion of the 25th Brigade was accordingly sent to the coastal sector, and advanced to Chehim which was taken on June 27th after a brisk encounter with tanks and machine guns. Part of the 2/2nd Pioneers (17th Brigade), expanded into a force of all arms, then took up the advance and captured two mountain villages at trifling cost. On the 4th July Australian patrols entered Rharife which had been abandoned by the enemy and was being shelled by him.

At Jezzine itself Brigadier Plant had set his artillery the task of blasting the enemy off the heights he occupied to the north of the town. This was very thoroughly accomplished. On June 28th patrols found the positions abandoned, and strewn with dead men and broken equipment. Thereafter the 25th Brigade worked steadily

<sup>1</sup> Map 3.

northward, meeting some opposition and never losing touch with the enemy.

On the coast, where the 2/14th Battalion had rejoined its own brigade after the arrival of the 2/33rd Battalion at Jezzine, progress had been hampered, but never stopped for long, by Vichy artillery fire. By the end of the month Australian forward posts were established in the vicinity of Es Soyar with patrols probing forward towards the Damour river, only a mile away.<sup>1</sup> Point 394, a hill valuable for observation purposes, was secured by the 2/27th Battalion on the night of the 29th/30th. The Cheshire Yeomanry watched the tracks leading inland from Aaqliye, while the Vichy batteries searched the ridges and valleys south of Es Soyar.

The voice of the Royal Navy was heard frequently during these days, for our cruisers and destroyers were carrying out a bombardment programme against coastal batteries, and gun positions further inland—with most satisfactory results.

## Change in Command

ON July 5th General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, exchanged appointments with General Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief in India.

Wavell's reports to London had consistently revealed a tempered optimism. He had never been of opinion that the occupation of Syria would be easy or that any kind of spectacular success would be achieved; but he knew that the task must be done and would be done. It is true that after the fall of Damascus a period of disappointment and frustration had followed; but the Commander-in-Chief believed that continuous pressure would eventually bring results.

As early as June 24th Wavell had reported that the Vichy French were tiring: they had lost 2,000 prisoners, nearly all their units had suffered considerable losses, and half their tanks were out of action: sooner or later their resistance must collapse. We know now that this judgment was an accurate one, although at the end of the month, as will be related in due course, Dentz refused an invitation to parley.

Dentz was obliged to yield to the pressure exercised by the Vichy Government and by Berlin who insisted that resistance must be maintained. Plans had been made for the reinforcement of Syria, Germany releasing the equivalent of two divisions of French troops which were sent overland to Salonika with a view to transportation

<sup>1</sup> Map 9.



across Turkey. But Turkey, although she had yielded to von Papen's blandishments and signed a non-aggression pact with Germany, could not be brought to allow the passage of armed forces through her territory. The request was made by the Vichy Minister at Ankara, and refused before the end of June. Nothing more could be done, for the Royal Navy was able to prevent the arrival of reinforcements by sea: on July 1st the Fleet Air Arm sank a French transport off the coast of Asia Minor, north-west of Cyprus.

The only reinforcements which did come consisted of French aircraft which could be flown in without hindrance from the Allies; but these did little more than make good the losses which had been suffered. German bombers had played a small and diminishing part by carrying out occasional raids on Haifa. By this time, too, we had begun to enjoy air superiority, and the original advantage in tank strength possessed by Vichy had been largely nullified by losses in action and the shortage of fuel.

It is true that the morale of the Vichy troops remained reasonably high. They could not easily realize the gravity of the situation; they merely knew that in numbers and equipment they seemed to be superior to the attacking forces, that they were fighting in country that was entirely favourable to defence and that they had often been able to give as good as they got in battle. Moreover, during the opening phase of the campaign the sky over the battlefield had more frequently been dominated by Vichy than by British aircraft. This was due not only to the greater numbers at Vichy's disposal but also to the strategy of our Air Command in concentrating offensively against the Vichy aerodromes and defensively to cover the fleet operating on the coastal flank. It was a justified strategy, but it had not contributed to the demoralization of the French troops in the field.

The attitude of the civil population was another matter. Syrians and Lebanese alike, viewed the struggle with detachment. Those who dwelt in the direct line of the advance were apt to call down 'A plague o' both your houses', but even these unbellicose Mercutios showed unfeigned relief, mounting sometimes to enthusiasm, when the tide of war swept past, doing as a rule singularly little damage to civilian life or property and, so it seemed, bringing freedom from the unloved rule of France. And there was threat of a food shortage in Beirut.

So, when Wavell departed, it may fairly be said that in Cairo all had been done that could have been done to bring the Syrian campaign to a successful conclusion. Good progress had been made,

and it was reasonable to expect that the troops engaged or about to be engaged were now sufficient for the purpose, although the whole force was of no great strength. General Wilson had at his disposal the equivalent of rather more than three divisions: the 7th Australian Division; the Free French which counted only two brigades; the 6th Division also of two brigades to which were added the remnants of the 5th Indian Brigade; Habforce; and the Indian columns operating from Iraq. None of these formations was fully equipped, nor did it conform to any recognized war establishment. Until the end we were obliged to rely upon improvised forces.

But we were closing in upon the desert flank; pinning the defenders to their ground north-west of Damascus and north of Merjayoun; and preparing to deliver, from the mountains to the sea the decisive blow which would give us Beirut.

General Auchinleck appeared upon the scene at a time when nearly all our forces in the Middle East were being reorganized and re-equipped after a series of harassing campaigns undertaken with inadequate resources. He had every confidence in Wilson. When it was suggested to him from London that he might be able to spare heavy tanks for Syria he decided that such reinforcement was unnecessary; and in any case he considered that he would not be justified in moving armour away from the Western Desert.



## CHAPTER VI

# 'ALL'S WELL, WELL ENDED'

### Passage of the Damour

THE natural strength of the Damour position lay partly in the river gorge itself which is steep and extremely difficult of access, though the river is neither so broad nor so swift as the Litani and flows nowhere more than three feet deep; and partly in the ridges which dominate it on the northern side, inland from the coast.

The main defence line was based on a comparatively low ridge, known as El Aatiqa, just north of the river. The approaches were covered by anti-tank mines and a large number of machine-gun nests had been built into the hillside. These pits, surrounded by sandbags and roofed with bamboo, proved extraordinarily difficult to detect, and the whole position was covered by an intricate system of barbed wire. The higher spurs further inland were more lightly held, reliance being placed on the natural difficulty of the ground which made tank operations quite impossible and infantry movement slow and uncertain.

The coastal plain, not much more than 1,000 yards wide from the sea to the foothills, was very thickly planted with banana and palm, affording ample cover not only to snipers but also to the French 75-mm. guns which were disposed in depth, the heavier pieces, 105-mm. and 155-mm., being sited further back among the hills on the inland side. And to the north of the plantations lay the long straggling village of Damour, whose houses were strongly organized for defence.

The bridge which carried the main coast road to Beirut had been demolished and the crossing was covered by machine-gun posts, while the approaches on the southern side were open to enfilade fire from a number of points among the banana groves.

The Damour line would have presented quite extraordinary difficulties to our attacking forces if the number of troops available to hold it had been commensurate with the importance of the

position. There were one and a half battalions of the Foreign Legion, one and a half battalions of Algerians, a battalion of Colonial infantry, a squadron of Tunisian Spahis and detachments of Senegalese. About seven light tanks and four armoured cars had been allocated to the sector.

This force was hardly adequate to defend all the points of attack in sufficient strength, particularly in view of the superiority in artillery which we now possessed.

The Australian plan was to deliver a holding attack against El Aatiqa ridge, in combination with a turning movement through the hills to the east. Despite the mountainous nature of the country, the difficulties did not seem too great for enterprising self-reliant troops, and success might well result in the envelopment and capture of considerable numbers of the defenders. And no sooner had the 21st Brigade broken the Damour line than the 17th Brigade would be passed through to drive straight up the road upon Beirut. Meanwhile, further inland, the 25th Brigade would maintain pressure to keep the enemy moving back along the road from Rharife to Beit ed Dine where Brigadier Plant would link up with the main advance.<sup>1</sup>

Full naval co-operation in bombarding the enemy coast was to be given by four cruisers and eight destroyers of Rear-Admiral H. B. Rawling's 7th Cruiser Squadron, and a squadron of bombers with a squadron of fighters, besides tactical reconnaissance aircraft, would be available to support the land attack. These squadrons were placed under direct command of the 7th Australian Division.

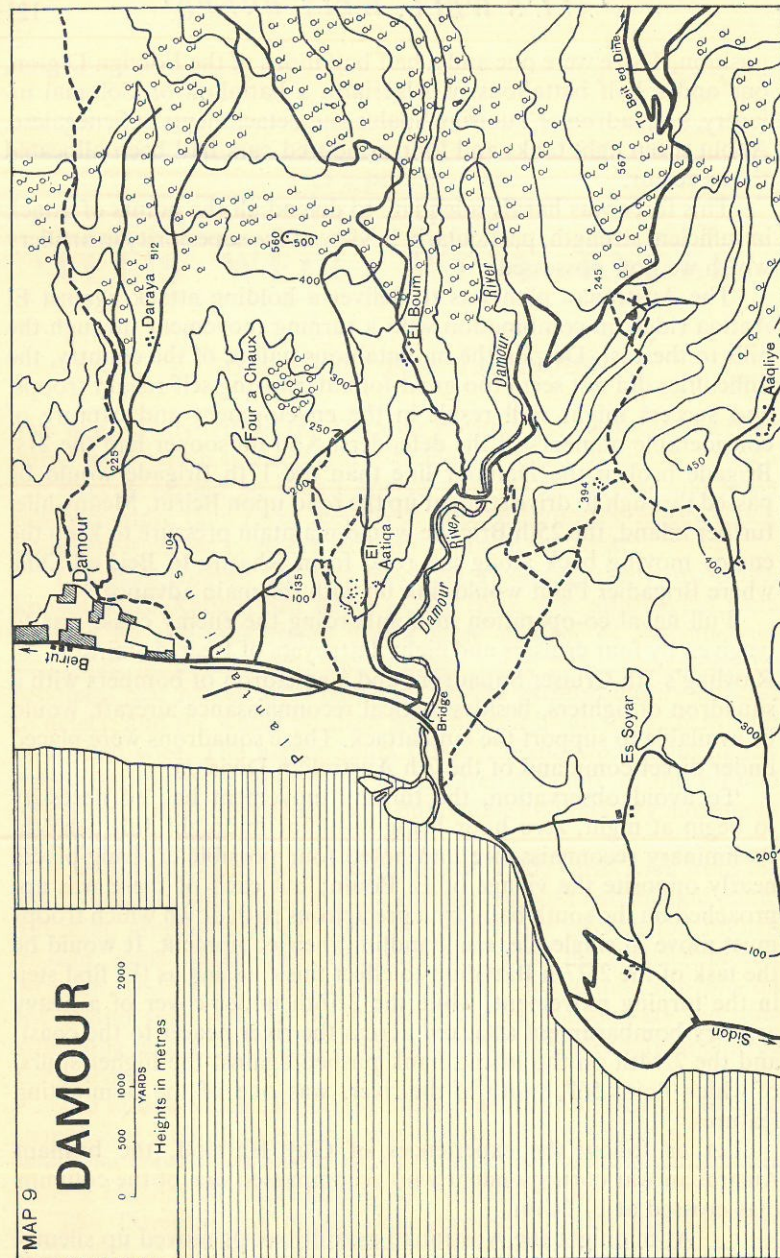
To avoid observation, the turning movement had of necessity to begin at night, zero hour being fixed for midnight July 5th/6th. Preliminary reconnaissance had noted four possible crossing-places nearly opposite the village of El Boum; but each of these was approached on the south bank by a precipitous path down which troops must move in single file, manhandling their equipment. It would be the task of the 2/27th Battalion to effect this crossing as the first step in the turning movement, while the 2/16th under cover of a heavy artillery bombardment attacked across the river nearer to the coast, and the 2/14th on the inland flank pushed against the higher spurs, of which Point 567, south of the river, was one of the dominating features.

Let us follow the experiences of Guy Harriott, the brilliant Australian war correspondent who accompanied one of the columns that crossed at El Boum.

'At midnight the Australian assault troops moved up silently

<sup>1</sup> Map 5.





'to their jumping-off point on the south bank of the river some miles above the mouth, where it was believed that the French, relying on the appallingly difficult country, had a lighter force than elsewhere. Bright moonlight gleaming dully on bayonets and glinting on the surface of the river hundreds of feet below lent a curious touch of unreality to the scene.

'Bare, rocky ridges, with a few stunted shrubs clinging precariously to their boulder-strewn slopes, rise one behind the other in a wearying succession seamed with steep gulleys where loose stones made the going treacherous.

'Zero hour came and the attackers began to scramble down single file into the gorge. From the French line there was no sound and it looked as if the attack was going to be a complete surprise. After half an hour's mountaineering they reached the bed of a wadi without a shot being fired.

'But the French had posted trained dogs along the northern bank, and just as the first troops began to splash through the shallow stream—it was between two and three feet deep—an infernal din of yelping and barking broke out from these vigilant sentinels.

'Immediately the French machine-guns, firing on fixed lines which they had previously "taped" to a hair, opened up, mortars joined in and the whole north bank seemed to erupt in a sheet of flame. We lost a number of men here.

'The need of concealment was gone, and our men swept forward across the river. The north bank of the gorge swept by a hell of machine-gun and mortar fire rose steep and forbidding before them, but like their fathers on the death-strewn escarpments of Gallipoli they never faltered or paused.

'Slinging their bayoneted rifles on their backs to give freer play to their hands they swarmed up the slope. Some fell, but their fellows pressed on, swept the French off the crest with the bayonet, and, pushing forward without giving them time to re-organize, cleared the heights beyond.

'Before the first light began to break over the hills to the eastward our artillery opened with every gun they had, plastering the French posts ahead with tons of high explosive. As dawn broke, the naval vessels stood in close to the shore and joined their powerful salvos to the land batteries, while the R.A.F. and R.A.A.F. planes, sweeping the French fighters from the skies, bombed and machine-gunned wherever they saw a target.

'Behind this barrage the weary infantrymen toiled slowly



'ahead across the ridges, clearing out machine-gun nests, where 'blue-uniformed legionaries held on grimly to the end, mopping 'up mortars and cleverly concealed snipers and always pushing 'on, so that by the end of the day the main French defence was 'completely smashed.'<sup>1</sup>

Our bombardment which opened at 1.20 a.m. on the morning of Sunday, July 6th, was carried out by sixty guns, much the most powerful concentration of artillery that had been employed during the campaign. Following a preliminary shelling of all known Vichy positions, a barrage was to cover the forward movement of the 2/16th Battalion, the coastal column, to the river; then a 'box barrage' would protect it as it formed up for the assault. An enfilade barrage would be provided for one company when it attacked from the east the enemy posts in the banana plantations near the shore.

The leading companies duly crossed the river and established themselves beyond. But once the guns increased their range, which they did after three hours' shelling, little progress could be made through the thick groves of the coastal plain, though the Navy joined in the bombardment as soon as dawn arrived, as they had done for several days previously. Until darkness fell there was no possibility of the Australian sappers being able to start upon the construction of a bridge over the river near the main road. Even when they were able to get to work in the evening they were still subject to artillery and machine-gun fire.

Here we renew acquaintance with Lieutenant A. R. Cutler, that artillery subaltern who had played a particularly gallant part at Merjayoun. After the infantry advance had been checked he went forward over fire-swept ground to observe for his battery and was severely wounded, losing a leg. To him was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Meanwhile the 2/27th Battalion had found the going extremely slow among the rocks. It had been rightly estimated that the French, relying upon the natural difficulty of the country, would leave no very large force to cover this area, so progress was largely a matter of mountaineering; and even without more than spasmodic opposition—some machine-gun posts were difficult to subdue—it took three and a half hours to cover two and a half miles.

Though a little behind schedule, the battalion reached its objective, taking the vital crest, Hill 560. At nightfall the 2/14th Battalion came through and reached the Daraya vicinity. The 2/14th was short

<sup>1</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, July 8th, 1941.

of two companies which had been fighting hard on the eastern flank: Point 567, south of the river, had been an easy conquest, but once taken it had to be defended against repeated counter-attacks.

So the first day had seen the coastal or 'fixing' attack firmly pinned just north of the river, while the turning movement had made definite though limited progress to the east. The operation was going more or less according to plan, though more slowly than was to be desired. There had been no sign of a real crack in the defence.

Despite this, however, General Allen, the divisional commander, determined to start passing his exploiting brigade through without further delay, and during the night two battalions of the 17th Brigade were moved across the river in the El Boum sector and pushed forward towards Daraya village and wadi.

In the early afternoon of the 7th the 2/3rd Battalion reached the hills due east of Damour and in the evening repulsed a counter-attack against the right flank which almost reached the commanding position known as Point 512. Close in rear of the 2/3rd came the 2/5th.

This advance of the 17th Brigade was greatly assisted by the action of the 2/14th Battalion which, from its position near Daraya had wheeled left against the eastern side of Damour. Some of the Australians actually entered the houses, and, in the course of brisk fighting, collected nearly a hundred prisoners. The 2/27th was still defending Point 560 against persistent counter-attack delivered from the east: on its other flank parties of the enemy were routed north-west of the locality called Four à Chaux.

All this was very well, but in the coastal sector, down near the river mouth, Vichy held on with grim determination. The 2/16th Battalion could do no more than cling to the narrow foothold it had won upon the northern bank. In the poor visibility which prevailed, and the difficulty of locating our forward troops and those of the enemy, the three British cruisers and six destroyers that lay off shore could not shell with advantage the plantations where all the trouble lay.

At half-past two on the afternoon of the 7th the Australian engineers, who had worked throughout under a galling fire, completed the bridge across the Damour river. Three cavalry tanks, followed by two companies of the 2/2nd Pioneers from Savige's 17th Brigade, then made the crossing: but no more could be done.

July 8th, also, proved a disappointing day on the coast. With the bridge complete and tanks already on the northern bank there was hope that we might get forward up the road to Damour and beyond.



But in these dense groves infantry could make only the slowest penetration, where every clump of trees might, and usually did, conceal a determined machine-gunner. As for the tanks, they could only move on the road, and the Vichy 'seventy-fives' kept the road well marked. One machine did attempt to advance. It was hit and set on fire.

Morning, noon, afternoon—the French continued to hold their ground in the plantations, seemingly unperturbed by the presence of Australian troops in the hills, and now descending into the plain, far round on their rear. In the absence of a naval bombardment, which in any case would have to be carried out without fighter protection, there was nothing for it but to blast a way through with the field artillery, and at 3.30 p.m. our guns opened upon the Vichy machine-gun positions.

This was how it appeared to an observer that day:

'The sunny countryside had a few minutes earlier looked 'utterly peaceful. Now it was transformed into a place filled with 'flying death. It was splendid shelling. The guns were ranging 'into the groves just short of the town along a line nearly a mile 'in length. Presently their shells were throwing up a screen of 'grey dust about two hundred feet high right from the sea to a 'point beyond the inland edge of the groves. The red roofs of the 'town were almost obscured by dust. The guns thudded on 'ruthlessly, and it was difficult to believe that anything could live 'through the hail of steel which must have been sweeping through 'the groves. Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the barrage 'ceased, the echoes died away. Infantrymen who had been lying 'low in the groves while the shells whirled over their heads went 'into action again.'

During that half-hour of intense bombardment 3,650 shells were hurled at the enemy positions. It was all very splendid and effective—or it would have been, if the Vichy machine-gunners had not simply crept well forward under cover of the thick plantations when the bombardment began and so escaped the worst effects of the fire.

Elsewhere, the 'untidy' battle now promised to be decisive. The advance of the 17th Brigade continued. Among the foothills near the coast road nearly two miles north of Damour the 2/5th Battalion captured first a battery and then a French colonel and his staff. On the right rear of this advance the 2/3rd cleared the enemy from a commanding position, taking prisoners and guns. The chief resistance occurred much further south at Point 560, where the 2/27th Battalion of the 21st Brigade was engaged nearly all day in repulsing counter-

attacks delivered from the east and north-east with the support of accurate mortar fire.

Then, at last, on the coast before Damour a night attack brought swift and satisfying success. The defenders were doubtless feeling the strain: perhaps supplies of ammunition and food were running out. At all events, when the Pioneers attacked just after midnight, July 8th/9th, they went clean through the enemy position and entered Damour. By 7 a.m. our men had joined hands with the companies of the 2/14th on the eastern edge of the village. The cavalry pushed forward along the road where unused stacks of mines lay by the wayside. There was no resistance now. The 2/16th Battalion was clearing the El Aatiqa position where a variety of armament and much equipment had been abandoned.

Ahead of the advance Australian aircraft had struck at targets south of Beirut, exploding a large ammunition dump and attacking with machine-gun fire goods trains and road transport. The 7th Australian Division was advancing along its whole front. While Savage's 17th Brigade pressed forward along the coast road bound for Beirut, and Stevens's 21st Brigade in the centre began to move eastward through the mountains, Plant with his 25th Brigade was making for Beit ed Dine.<sup>1</sup>

Plant had begun his northward advance on the 6th July when Niha was occupied. Patrols covered the whole area traversed by the Rharife and Niha roads, parties of the enemy retreating before them. The final action in this region began on the night of July 9th/10th when a company of the 2/31st Battalion was set to storm the heights overlooking the mountain villages of Baadarane and Ain Matour. A hail of fire checked the assault, but Private James H. Gordon then went forward alone and attacked a machine-gun post where he killed four men with the bayonet. It was then possible to take the position. Weapons change, but the episode might have come directly from the pages of the *Iliad*: Gordon, who fought with superb courage throughout the action, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

### 'Hold, enough.'

WHEN on July 9th the Australian break-through on the coast was achieved General Dentz knew that the end had come.

On June 30th Mr. Engert, American Consul-General at Beirut, had, on the initiative of the British Command, approached Dentz

<sup>1</sup> Map 5.



with a suggestion for a conference to discuss the possibility of bringing hostilities to an end. Dentz had refused. Neither Vichy, nor Vichy's master at Berchtesgaden, were yet prepared to yield. Palmyra had not yet fallen, nor had the assault at Damour begun.

All was different now.

On the 6th July the Household Cavalry from Palmyra joined hands with British armoured cars operating from Damascus in company with the Free French.<sup>1</sup> Furqlus, on the road to Homs was occupied next day, and on the 8th the Damascus-Palmyra route was opened as a line of supply. All was nearly ready for an advance to cut the Homs-Damascus road.

Away to the north-east General Slim's Indian troops were completing their task. To intercept a reported retreat of Vichy forces westward along the frontier towards Jerablus most of the troops at Raqqa drove northward on the night of the 8th, but only succeeded in exchanging fire with the enemy rearguard as it crossed the Euphrates. At Raqqa our depleted garrison was heavily attacked on July 9th by a band which appears to have been led by our old opponent Fawzi Qawukji. Fighting lasted until well into the night but the enemy was eventually driven off with considerable loss.

From Tel Aalo (eighteen miles up the railway from Tel Kotchek) a column moved on the 7th July to Kameshli where the railway leaves Syrian territory. No opposition was encountered and the Vichy troops departed by peaceful agreement, leaving us the frontier town and large quantities of food, arms and equipment. Another column moved southward from Tel Aalo on July 8th and entered into undisputed possession of Hassech, the seat of local government. On the 9th Ras el Ain, at the frontier, was occupied; and thus the whole of the 'Duck's Bill' was cleared with practically no loss of life or, to employ the picturesque old phrase, 'without shivering a spear'.

And now that all the Vichy aerodromes were within operating range of our fighter aircraft, the threat from the R.A.F. took on a much more formidable aspect. During the last fortnight there had been no fewer than 300 sorties by our fighters alone. Thirty-one Vichy aircraft had been destroyed during that period, twenty-three of them on the ground. It was the almost total elimination of his air force, coupled with the Australian break-through on the coast south of Beirut, that persuaded General Dentz to negotiate.

So, on July 9th he made his first request for the cessation of hostilities, and Mr. Churchill was able to announce to the House of Commons that 'formal application had been made for a discussion

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.

of terms leading to an armistice' but that meanwhile military operations must of course continue. Vichy that same evening made it clear that Dentz had acted with Vichy approval. The Pétain Government justified this course on the grounds that it had proved impossible to supply or reinforce the French troops, that the struggle was therefore becoming more and more unequal, and that it wished to spare the people of Syria and the Lebanon any further sufferings.

Since a cessation of hostilities was what we had been striving for from the start the Vichy request was welcome; and we were not unprepared for it. Actually, in the middle of June General Wavell had sent to London an outline of his own conditions for a suspension of arms—one should not say 'armistice' because there had been no formal declaration of war—when the time should arrive. Wavell had paid due regard to the promises made in our propaganda to the Vichy troops, for we could not break our word to them. The terms now to be offered were substantially the same. They were submitted to General Dentz on the morning of July 11th, through the agency of the United States Consul-General.

The proposals were reported to Vichy, which endeavoured to play for time by describing the terms as 'unacceptable' and by objecting in particular to any negotiations with the 'traitors' de Gaulle and Catroux. At the same time they left Dentz, in effect, a free hand to act as he saw best.

Dentz knew that nothing is harder than to renew a fight once terms have been requested, but he was employing the time at his disposal to carry out a number of actions that would send up his stock with his German masters. He flew off his British officer prisoners to Europe, where some of them were handed over to the Germans. He ordered his remaining aircraft to depart for other French possessions. He had the British tanker *Pegasus*, then a prize in French hands, brought to the mouth of Beirut harbour and sunk there together with two other British vessels. He sent the last of his own ships to Turkish waters for internment. And he set in motion an intricate organization for the supply of information to the Axis and the political disruption of Syria.

Then Dentz felt he could allow himself to discuss 'armistice' terms. The American Consul-General had a shrewd suspicion of what was going on and warned us that Dentz might merely be playing for time in the hope of a last-minute German intervention to prolong the struggle and cause the maximum damage to the British cause and to the Free French movement. However, we could not do other than take the Vichy request at its face value and accept the plea for a



suspension of hostilities at midnight July 11th/12th. The French High Commissioner was requested to send envoys to the British outposts on the coastal road at or before 9.30 a.m. on the morning of July 12th, otherwise our operations would be resumed.

## Jebel Mazar

WE must now spare a thought to the regions further east where the British 6th Division confronted the Vichy forces north of Merjayoun and astride the Damascus-Beirut road at Jebel Mazar.<sup>1</sup>

On the Merjayoun front the Border Regiment and the Durham Light Infantry of the 23rd Brigade had engaged in patrol encounters with the enemy who appeared to have deserted the area west of the Litani. On the other flank the Czechoslovaks occupied Chebaa (on a spur of Mount Hermon) but Vichy troops regained the village on July 10th. This action probably served to cover a general withdrawal, for when the 23rd Brigade advanced next morning towards the Bekaa plain no enemy could be seen. Demolitions and 'booby-traps' were many, so progress was very slow and never again was there a chance to bring the French to battle.

It had been decided that General Evetts should make another effort to carry the Jebel Mazar position where R.A.F. reconnaissance seemed to show that the enemy had thinned out his infantry. He had certainly not done the same to his mortars, machine guns and artillery. Evetts launched his attack on the night of July 10th/11th after he had informed all units that Vichy was reported to be seeking a cessation of hostilities; therefore the utmost pressure must be exerted upon the enemy troops who could not be allowed to think themselves undefeated in the field.

At first all went well. The battalion of French marine infantry which had relieved the Leicestershire on the right was reported to have secured a spur leading up to Jebel Habil immediately south of the railway. The advance continued, while the 2nd King's Own in the centre and the 2nd Queen's on the left were making satisfactory progress up the steep and rugged slopes of Jebel Mazar.

When day dawned, however, the French were seen to be in difficulties owing to the accurate fire of the Vichy guns and mortars. They were therefore withdrawn by companies to the vicinity of Dimmas to reorganize for a fresh effort; and the tank squadron of 9th Australian Division cavalry was sent forward up the main road.

<sup>1</sup> Map 7.

The Australians pushed on boldly under heavy fire. In a gorge beyond Dimmas the leading tank smashed through a road-block, but was then hit and lost with all its crew. The French marine battalion never got going again and was relieved in the evening by the 2nd Leicestershire.

Throughout July 10th the two British battalions stuck grimly to their task on the slopes of Jebel Mazar. The King's Own took Point 1404 in the morning and, late in the afternoon, were fighting round Point 1455. By 5 p.m. the Queen's had gained a position south of Point 1634 which marks the crest of the ridge. A gap which developed on the right of the Queen's was filled by the company of Royal Fusiliers from the composite battalion of the 5th Indian Brigade. The North Somerset Yeomanry (from the 1st Cavalry Division) covered the extreme left flank and made progress during the day only to be thrust back under heavy fire in the evening.

There was little pause in the fight. Before daylight on the 11th an advance of the Leicestershire had reached the approaches to Jebel Habil. Later came a counter-attack by infantry and tanks and our men were forced to give ground. In the afternoon they partially restored the position, and sent back nearly forty prisoners. They could do no more.

On Jebel Mazar the King's Own had done considerable execution, capturing Point 1455 with the bayonet. Then they were assailed by tanks and infantry and lost the height, many officers being killed or wounded. The Queen's, after having failed to carry Point 1634 by night attack, had suffered severely from Vichy artillery fire and were somewhat disorganized.

At 4.45 p.m. General Evetts gave the order for a general withdrawal of the brigade to its starting line. Even so, it proved impossible to extricate two companies of the Queen's who became cut off and were taken prisoner. Since 180 prisoners had been taken by the enemy on the previous day our losses were mounting in a disturbing manner. It was clear that a fresh relief would be necessary, and the 14th Brigade, whom we last met in Crete where it had defended Heraklion, prepared to take over. It had just arrived from Egypt.

Yet things were not quite so black as they looked. It was the old story of the difficulty of knowing the extremities of the other side. For, while our guns fired a heavy barrage to cover the retreat of the sorely-tried 16th Brigade, the enemy himself was engaging in a vigorous cannonade, though there was no sign that he proposed to follow it up with an infantry attack.



In fact he was going back. His troops, though fighting with all the advantages of ground, had been considerably tired and weakened by our persistent assaults, and on this last day the Vichy artillery had begun to suffer as the result of the effective 'spotting' for our batteries by the R.A.F. After the cessation of hostilities, when our troops were able to indulge in the Virgilian satisfaction of examining the 'Doric camp' they found that four of the Vichy 'seventy-fives' had been blown clean out of their gunpits as the result of a twenty-minute concentration by eight of our guns.

The French commander could afford to withdraw, for a series of almost equally strong positions was available in rear. And so it came about that while our battalions were moving back across the open plain the Vichy troops were retreating in the opposite direction to a line along the next ridge about six miles away.

The guns of friend and foe, alike in action to cover a retreat, were carrying out the last shoot of the campaign. For while on Jebel Mazar

*the tired waves, vainly breaking,  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,*

elsewhere the stubborn defence had at last been overwhelmed. On the coast the Australians had won the decisive battle for Beirut, and far out in the eastern desert Habforce had occupied nearly the whole of the Damascus-Homs road. The way from Damascus had been a rough one, and if the weary troops had reason to regret that Jebel Mazar remained unconquered when they limped back for the last time across a valley of dry bones, they were soon to receive the knowledge that sometimes comes to men who have fought bravely without avail:

*If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;  
It may be, in yon smoke conceal'd,  
Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,  
And, but for you, possess the field.*

## Suspension of Arms

THE Australians had been in contact with fragmentary resistance from both tanks and infantry during the 10th and 11th of July in the neighbourhood of the coastal village of Khalde, but they were now only six miles from Beirut, and, had he not been averse to further destruction and loss of life, General Wilson could have launched a heavy attack on the city before the hour for the cessation of

hostilities. But such an attack could only have embittered subsequent relations without producing any really useful result. Accordingly, Wilson held his hand.

Rumours of an impending truce were rife among the troops throughout July 11th, but it was not until after 8 p.m. that Australian divisional headquarters received official information that fighting would cease at midnight. It did not prove easy to convey the news to many of the isolated outposts in the hills, but by using Lucas lamps to flash the information all units were warned in time. Vichy was less efficient, or less willing, in the punctual transmission of the news. In the hills above the Beirut road French machine-gun posts kept up an intermittent fire until 8 a.m. on the following morning; in the neighbourhood of Homs Vichy armoured cars carried out a raid on July 12th after the 'Cease Fire!' and captured a British staff captain and some of our signal codes which he carried with him; and three enemy fighters attacked our ground forces at Raqqa the same day. All these incidents may have been due to ignorance or misunderstanding.

At ten minutes past eight on the morning of July 12th the French representatives, headed by General de Verdilhac, duly appeared in front of the Australian outposts on the road south of Beirut. They were immediately driven to Acre where Sir Sydney Smith had once repulsed Napoleon and frustrated his plan of an Eastern conquest. General Sir H. Maitland Wilson, Air Commodore L. O. Brown, Captain A. J. V. Morse, R.N., and General Catroux, the last-named representing the Free French, received them. Discussions continued all day. It was discovered that de Verdilhac was not, in fact, a plenipotentiary and had only authority to initial the drafts; but his status was eventually accepted and it was agreed that the final signatures should be recorded in the same place on Monday, July 14th.

Failure of the electric light and delay in providing hurricane lamps resulted in a confused and rather undignified prelude to the actual initialling which was fixed for 10 p.m.

The terms provided for the occupation of Syria and the Lebanon by the British and Free French forces; the Vichy troops to receive the full honours of war, keeping their personal arms but handing over their ammunition. Heavier equipment and armament, port installations, ships and aircraft, public services of all kinds, were to be handed over intact. Prisoners of war were to be exchanged, the French prisoners being retained until ours were released. And all the French, military and civilian, were to have the option of rallying to the Allied cause or of being repatriated to France.



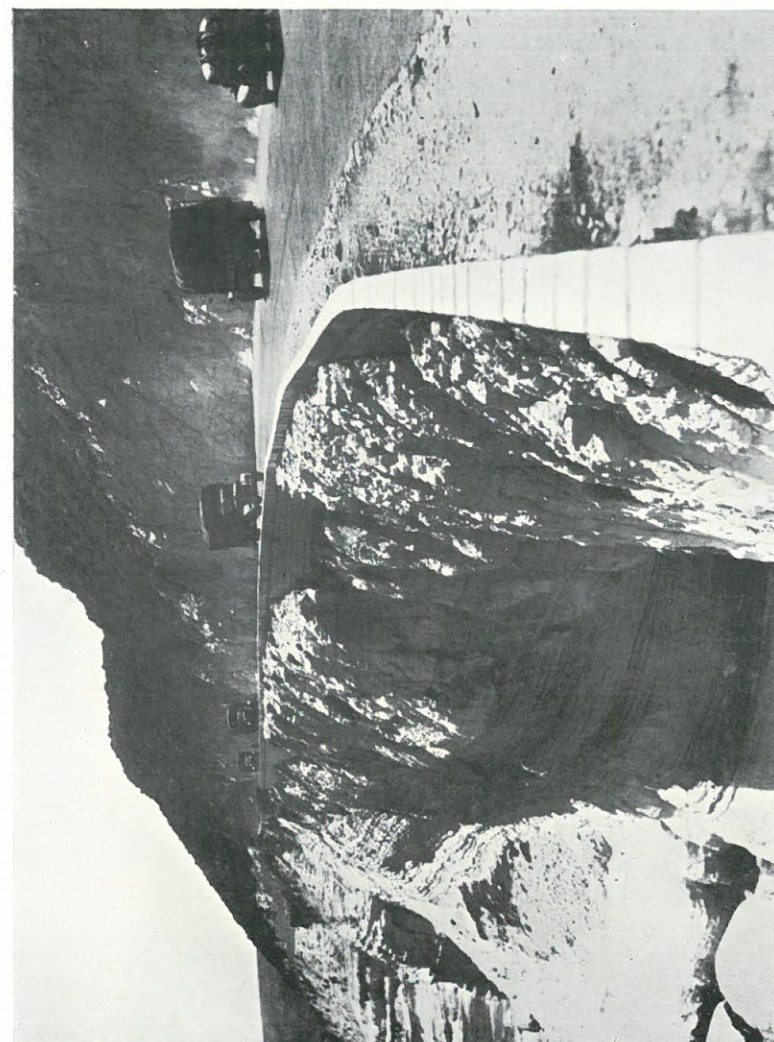
These terms cannot be described as ungenerous. They assured our hold upon the country as a precautionary measure against Axis attempts to infiltrate into it, but they took appropriate account of French susceptibilities and French national pride. The final signature duly took place in the Sydney Smith barracks at 11 a.m. on the morning of July 14th, that highly significant date in the life of the French nation. The historically-minded were also gratified to note that it occurred on the 750th anniversary of the conquest of the citadel of Acre by Richard Cœur de Lion.

Next day, while the Lebanese inhabitants ran out of their houses to wave and cheer, the Australian troops made their formal entry into Beirut with a squadron of the 6th Division cavalry, the 2/16th Battalion, and the band of the Corps headquarters guard. On the 16th General Wilson and General Catroux made their official entry, accompanied by Major-Generals Lavarack and Evetts. A mounted detachment of the *Garde Republicaine* did the honours at the Place des Martyrs, and guards of the Cheshire Yeomanry and Free French marines took post at the Grand Serail. All was conducted with due ceremony, the 'President of the Lebanon' and many other civilian notabilities being introduced.

Indiscriminate night bombing which had done much damage to Beirut was afterwards identified, to the satisfaction of General Jeannequin, commanding the Vichy air forces, as the work of German aircraft.

In the agreement for the cessation of hostilities the two articles most difficult to implement were those relating to the liberation of our prisoners of war and the repatriation of the troops of Vichy.

By the end of July, 841 British and Indian officers and men had returned, but many of the others had been sent out of Syria, a fact not disclosed by the Vichy representatives at Acre, and it afterwards transpired that some prisoners of war had actually been flown out of the country after the agreement had been initialled. Some, having been taken as far as Salonika, were put under German guard and conveyed into the interior of Europe; and a few were handed over to the Italians on Scarpanto island. Only gradually did these facts come to light. When the equivocal behaviour of the former Vichy High Commissioner was revealed, General Wilson exercised his right of internment General Dentz and thirty-five of his senior officers until such time as the terms of the agreement with regard to Allied prisoners of war were carried out. It was not until the end of August that the last of our prisoners was returned, and then General Wilson was obliged to protest at the treatment they had suffered.



Imperial War Museum

COAST-ROAD TO BEIRUT



Also, Dentz tried to ensure that Vichy's loss of Syria should not result in any considerable accession of strength to the Free French movement. We had framed the terms of the convention on the assumption that the French troops would be permitted absolute freedom of choice as between Vichy and the Free French. Dentz endeavoured to extract from each of his officers a signed declaration that he would remain loyal to the Pétain Government: the soldiers received orders not to talk to the British interrogators, and the familiar 'fear psychosis' proved of assistance in this endeavour to preserve some influence over the military and civil administration of the Levant.

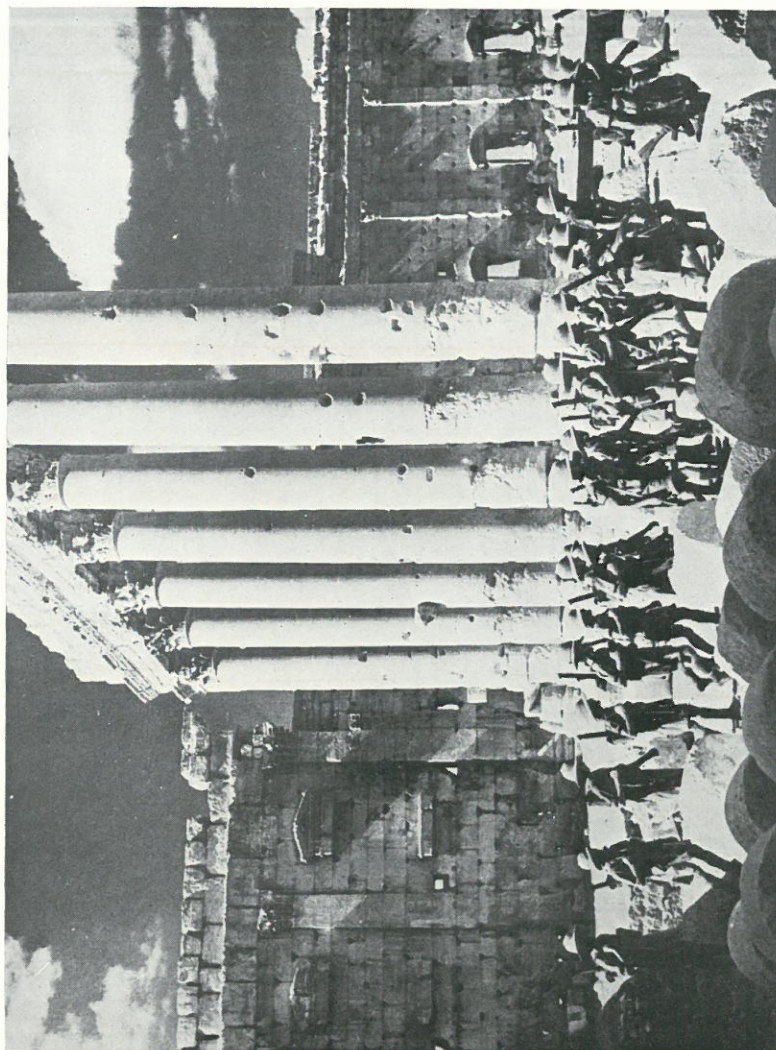
As a result, the canvass among the troops proved most disappointing to those who had hoped for a general rallying to the Cross of Lorraine. Only 5,688 opted for joining the Free French. This number was made up in about equal proportions of Foreign Legion and Colonial troops. The remainder of the Vichy soldiery, upwards of 20,000 in number, were evacuated by sea to North Africa, under our supervision, between the beginning of August and the end of September. General Dentz himself, after the prisoners despatched to Europe had been restored to us, was set at liberty and promptly departed to France.

## Retrospect

DISTASTEFUL as the whole Syrian affair was in some ways, it may perhaps be remembered as one of the last of the picturesque campaigns: men of the commando among the orange groves on the Litani bank; the charge on horseback of French Spahis; our Indian soldiers besieged in the house at Mezze; English yeomanry and Essex lads fighting among the fallen pillars of ancient Palmyra; picturesque battlemented forts frowning defiance across the eastern desert; young Australians in bright moonlight creeping stealthily down the ravine of the Damour to be greeted by the growl of French watchdogs on the river's brink. . . .

Here, perhaps, may be revived the story of the gallant and immaculate French officer who defied us from the ramparts of one of these same battlemented forts. He emptied the contents of his revolver in the direction of our 25-pdrs., and only by the greatest tact on our part was the tension relieved and an honourable and peaceful surrender secured. Afterwards an Indian *jemadar* said to a British officer, 'I was so afraid that the French gentleman would get hurt.'

F.V.—10



Imperial War Museum

ESSEX REGIMENT AT PALMYRA



There is, of course, no satisfaction to be derived from viewing the Syrian affair simply as a fratricidal struggle between the forces of two Powers—former allies and later to be allies again—both of whom had everything to lose by an Axis victory. One must consider the real issues.

To us the occupation of Syria was an unwelcome necessity undertaken in order to safeguard the northern flank of the Middle East Command. Once the French authorities, with the sanction of the Pétain Government, permitted the use of Syrian landing-grounds to German aircraft on their way to assist the Iraq rebellion, we could not choose but act. We had seen the process of infiltration at work with fatal results in Rumania and Bulgaria, to name but two countries; we simply could not afford to run the risk of permitting it to occur in Syria. For that reason the shrill indignation of Vichy as it pointed to the absence of German troops or of any German air establishment in Syria at the time of our invasion, was entirely beside the point. Vichy had shown its hand clearly enough early in May, when Pétain spoke of the necessity for a policy of closer collaboration with the Axis, and German aircraft arrived at Palmyra. Fortunately we acted in time. Germany, realizing that she was not in a position to provide effective support to Vichy once our troops crossed the frontier, had already withdrawn her agents. Thus we had to deal only with Vichy forces—either by attack or by moral suasion.

How we dealt with them has, in the past, caused some discussion and argument; but it is difficult to see how we could have gone about the business in any other fashion.

As we were not at war with the Pétain Government it was politic to invite the co-operation of the Vichy troops before resorting to force. Too much significance may have been attached to the defection of Colonel Collet, but there certainly existed some little hope that our overtures would not be entirely rejected. It is true that the presence of the Free French was calculated to exacerbate feeling, but we could hardly have denied to the troops of de Gaulle this opportunity to take part in the occupation of what was to remain a French administered territory. Without the Free French, too, we should have been so much the weaker in numbers; and, even as it was, our strength was less impressive than was desirable if we wished to persuade Vichy's professional soldiers to an honourable surrender without trial by battle.

We entered Syria with forces inferior in numbers to the defenders, markedly inferior in tank strength, inferior in available air power. The rugged mountainous country in western Syria and the Lebanon

provided almost ideal conditions for the defence which was for the most part conducted with ability and energy. Such misfortunes as befell us during the campaign may be attributed to the fact that we were obliged to employ improvised forces inadequately equipped and insufficient in numbers. The whole course of operations was, to a great extent, influenced by difficulties of supply and maintenance and the limitations imposed by the size and character of the air forces we had available. Risks had to be run and chances taken—a state of affairs only too familiar to General Wavell and his commanders in the Middle East during the year 1941. Yet by battle and manœuvre we ejected our opponents from one position after another so that in the fifth week we were able to secure control of a country of 60,000 square miles containing a population of ten and a half millions.

The other fighting services played their essential parts: the R.A.F. by concentrating attack upon the Vichy aerodromes, a policy which, if it did not seem to show much result during the first three weeks proved most effective in the long run; the Royal Navy by bombarding successive Vichy positions along the coast, and still more by its blockade which prevented Vichy from slipping in reinforcements by sea. This blockade was not maintained without loss, for three of our precious destroyers were put out of action by air attacks. We had not often been able to bring the larger and speedier Vichy destroyers to battle, but one was sunk off the Anatolian coast by the Fleet Air Arm and another in Beirut harbour by the R.A.F.; also, H.M. submarine *Parthian* accounted for the submarine *Souffleur*, and a few supply ships were sunk by our air attacks.

Battle casualties in General Wilson's command were rather less than 4,700. Those of the Australians amounted to 1,511 officers and men; the British and Indian troops lost 1,800; and the Free French reported some 1,300. The detachments of the 10th Indian Division who operated from Iraq suffered precisely eighty-five casualties, chiefly from air attack. As distinct from the wounded, several thousand sick passed through the field ambulances.

Vichy losses were somewhat higher: 222 officers and 6,130 men killed, wounded, and captured or deserted to the Free French while fighting was in progress.

When the Vichy resistance ended, the Allied troops superintended the carrying out of the terms of the convention, a procedure no more troublesome than was to be expected: some 'incidents' occurred as they were bound to do. The civil administration of Syria and the Lebanon then became a Free French affair, and General Wilson's



forces—later to be called the Ninth Army—were left with the responsibility of guarding the new northern flank of the Middle East Command. We now possessed a common frontier with Turkey over a distance of 300 miles, and had deepened our zone of defence against any German thrust southward or south-eastward through Asia Minor. Such a thrust was never made; but it might have been made if the Russian front had failed to hold, and at this time none could assess with certainty the Russian powers of resistance against the Nazi invader.

## PERSIA 1941



## PERSIA 1941

### A New Ally

THE short campaign in Persia at the end of August 1941 represents the third, and final, act by which the great area that lies between the Mediterranean and the western frontier of India was cleared of German interference and intrigue. Like the previous campaigns in Iraq and Syria it was a defensive operation which the British Government and the British Middle East Command would have preferred not to have had to undertake. We went into Persia, as we had previously gone into Iraq and Syria to uproot enemy influence and forestall enemy action. And just because we met with swift, almost immediate, success there was a tendency in some quarters to think that perhaps the campaign need not have occurred, that perhaps this display of force to bring a much weaker nation to our way of thinking as regards the Axis threat was unnecessary. In fact the 'Persian interlude' was an essential development of the war in the summer of 1941. It had to occur.

German interest in Persia was both strategic and economic. The country lay directly on the route of any *Drang nach Osten*. It was the gateway to India. And German forces once established on the Persian Gulf would have travelled the greater part of the way towards linking up with their Japanese ally as part of a grandiose strategic plan which should lay the world at the feet of the three Powers that formed the Axis. There was a further strategic inducement when Germany enrolled Soviet Russia in the ranks of her enemies. Apart from shattering the Russian armies, one great objective in the campaign that was now being waged between the Arctic Circle and the Black Sea was the rich territory of the Ukraine and beyond that the oil region of the Caucasus. Control of Persia would provide Germany with the opportunity of threatening this area from the south at the very time when her armies were rolling forward in triumph towards it from the north. Might not the double threat be too much for the hard-pressed Soviet armies and hasten the downfall of our new ally?

Secondly, there was the ever-potent lure of oil. The output of



the Persian oilfields far exceeded that of Iraq, and was sufficient, if it fell under the control of Germany, to render the latter country practically invulnerable in an economic war of exhaustion. Here, surely, was a prize worth plotting for, worth fighting for.

All this, though doubtless pondered and weighed in Berlin and elsewhere, had not stirred to appropriate action the omnipotent being who dictated German strategy from his military headquarters on the Eastern Front. Von List and Rommel and Student, who had achieved so much in the brief but triumphant spring campaigns on either side of the Mediterranean and on the great island of Crete that lies between, were never given the opportunity and the means to exploit their successes by a co-ordinated effort to carry the Swastika further eastward towards India.

This is not to say that Germany paid no attention to the active forwarding of her own interests and the frustration of those of her enemies in these regions. Passive acquiescence in the *status quo* had never been the Nazi way. Nazi agents were active in seeking to win Persia over in sympathy to the side of the Axis, and in endeavouring to do what harm they could to Britain and to Russia. But because they were denied the force with which to back their efforts they proved merely provocative and served to bring down upon themselves swift retribution ending in the overthrow of their work and their own expulsion from Persia.

German diplomatic activity by itself might not have proved sufficient to provoke our intervention but for the exigencies of the Russian campaign which flung Russia and Britain into alliance, an alliance that would continue so long as Nazi Germany remained in the field, a perpetual threat to both.

Russia, fighting grimly for her existence across the wide steppes and great rivers of eastern Europe, possessed adequate, indeed inexhaustible, man-power; Britain was producing war material in ever-increasing volume, but at this time she was in no position to open unaided an offensive front in the west. Her commitments in the Middle East, at sea, in the air, and now the mounting threat from Japanese Imperialism in the Far East, prevented her from maintaining home-based forces which were more than adequate to ensure her own safety from invasion. Meantime a high proportion of the produce of her workshops and factories might well be despatched to Russia to feed the giant armies of the eastern Power. But, as in the 1914 war, the search for adequate channels of communication created a new strategic situation and opened up (in this case only for a matter of days) a new sphere of military operations.

Convoys could and did sail from British harbours to Murmansk, the ice-free port in the far north. But to do so they had to run the gauntlet of German aircraft, submarines and surface ships concealed in the fjords of occupied Norway. Though speedy it was too costly a route upon which to depend. A 'way round' had to be discovered.

Since Murmansk was the natural and the only way of approach by the north, the way round had to be by the south. With Europe under the German heel and the Dardanelles inaccessible, it could only be by way of Persia. If Nazi Germany were to be defeated, Russia must be aided to the full; and full assistance to Russia required the opening up of the Persian route and its development to its fullest capacity. The energetic Shah, Riza Khan Pahlevi, had among other notable achievements constructed a Trans-Iranian railway from Bandar Shahpur on the Persian Gulf to Bandar Shah on the Caspian Sea. That railway, supplemented by other routes, could be the means of carrying desperately needed munitions of war to the Russian armies in the field and thereby assisting to check the advance of the Nazi juggernaut.<sup>1</sup>

Between Moscow and London early accord was reached on this important issue, and the mole-like activities of the numerous German agents (the tendency of our old friends the 'tourists' and 'technicians' to appear in countries marked down for subsequent German assimilation has previously been noted) provided adequate grounds for joint complaint by the two Governments. Diplomatic representations were to be made with a view to bringing about the reduction of the number of German agents in Persia. Already in July, 1941, they were believed to have reached the number of 2,000. Should diplomatic means fail, the armed forces of both Powers must be ready to achieve this end. Accordingly, Lieutenant-General E. P. Quinan, who commanded the rather widely scattered British forces in Iraq, received instructions as early as July 22nd to be prepared to undertake the occupation of the oilfields at Abadan in the extreme south-west corner of the country near the head of the Gulf; and also those at Naft-Shah about halfway up the western frontier not far from the main Baghdad-Teheran road. Quinan's commitment was further extended by instructions to include the ports of Bandar Shahpur (at the southern terminus of the Trans-Iranian railway) and Bushire, 120 miles to the south-east.

But, first, diplomatic methods by means of joint Anglo-Russian representations would be made to rid the country of the busy swarm of German agents, many of whom held positions in the vital services

<sup>1</sup>Endpaper map A.



—posts, telegraphs and railways—and thereby exercised a control which was fatal to the possibility of closer Iranian co-operation with the Anglo-Russian war effort.

Following representations by the British and Soviet Ambassadors, the Shah's Government had announced at the end of July that Persian neutrality would be preserved, that the identity of foreign residents in the country was known and that these persons would not be allowed to indulge in subversive activities. Mr. Eden followed this up on August 6th with a statement in the House of Commons to the effect that the attention of the Persian Government had been called to the number of German residents in their country and the danger constituted by their presence. The hope was expressed that the Persian Government would take adequate steps to deal with the situation.

As the hints grew broader, it appears that the Shah hearkened to the extent of acquiescing in the expulsion of a few Germans for whose presence in the country no adequate justification could be given. But it was clear that a policy of delay and temporization was being pursued, and accordingly a joint Anglo-Russian Note was prepared.

This Note was to have been handed to the Persian Government on August 12th but its delivery was postponed until August 17th. Both Powers drew attention to the dangers which threatened Persia by the continued presence of German agents on her territory, and the Russians added a list of those who were known as notorious spies and organizers of Fifth Column activity. This list included Franz Mayer and Berthold Schultze. The former, working in the capital, played upon the private political and business ambitions of prominent Persians, while the rôle of the latter was to stimulate discontent among the tribesmen, particularly of south-western Persia where British interests were particularly important.

On August 21st it was learned that the reply of the Persian Government was definitely unsatisfactory. Signs of mounting xenophobia and a defiant chauvinism were apparent in the capital. The previous day the Shah delivered an address to the cadets passing out of the Persian Military Academy. He told them that they must 'be ready for sacrifices' and added that their customary leave had been cancelled, 'for reasons that they would later understand'.

That same day the Persian Minister in Washington had informed the American press, in what might be viewed as a propitiatory gesture, that there were no more than 700 Germans in Persia, many of whom had been there before the war began. No further visas, he

said, would be issued. Persia, he added, would maintain her neutrality against aggression, whatever its strength.

Warning orders had been issued to our troops, and all was in readiness for an advance into western and south-western Persia by General Quinan's forces on August 22nd. But Russian preparations were not quite complete, and as it was desirable, for both military and diplomatic reasons, that action should be taken simultaneously by the two great Powers, the date for the crossing of the frontier was postponed until August 25th.

The task before the Allied forces was not likely to be a formidable one in view of the immeasurable superiority which they commanded in every arm of war; but the plan of campaign was no less elaborately prepared on that account. For the more it could be rendered apparent to the Shah and his Government that Russia and Britain commanded overwhelming forces and were fully prepared to employ them, the more hope there was that the whole issue might be brought to a speedy and comparatively bloodless conclusion. As in Iraq and Syria we were about to enter a territory with whose inhabitants we had no quarrel and desired none; and if a major action with the Persian Army could be avoided so much the better.

For the invasion from the north General Novikov, the Russian commander, disposed of two powerful mechanized columns. One of these would move down the shore of the Caspian Sea through Pahlevi upon the important centre of Kazvin. The other, crossing the frontier 200 miles further to the west, would move upon Tabriz, the second city of Persia, and, after sending out columns to the west to occupy points around Lake Urmia near to the Turkish frontier, would converge by a good road upon Kazvin. Here the united columns would be less than 100 miles from Teheran, and well placed for continuing the advance upon the capital if the need should arise.

## British Plans

THE British plans likewise involved two separate advances, but in this case there was no prospect of the forces converging. The one would be concerned with the oilfields and ports of the extreme south-west, the other would take over the oilfields on the western frontier near Khanaqin and tackle the formidable Pai Tak Pass and the road that climbs the mountains to Kermanshah. The former would naturally be based upon Basra; the latter upon Baghdad.



Known as 'Iraq Force' the troops under Lieutenant-General Quinan's command in July consisted of the 8th and 10th Indian Divisions and also the 2nd Indian Armoured Brigade. The story of the brief Persian campaign—if campaign it can be called—is their story, although assistance was received from an old friend who has appeared in the previous pages of this volume. The name of this old friend is—or rather was—Kingcol.

The task in the Abadan region was confided to Major-General C. O. Harvey, commanding the 8th Indian Division.

Two battalions (2/6th Rajputana Rifles and 1st Kumaon Rifles) of the 24th Brigade (Brigadier R. E. Le Fleming) were to move the few miles down the Shatt al Arab from Basra to the gigantic oil refinery on the island of Abadan, secure these important installations intact, and protect the lives of the British population and the several hundred employes of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The Indian troops were under orders to deal with any Persian soldiery who obstructed them but to avoid damaging the refinery or the people who looked after it. A commentator has observed that this task was 'as simple as organizing a harmless revolver competition for boys in the china and glassware department of Selfridge's Store'.

Meanwhile two battalions (1/2nd and 2/3rd Gurkha Rifles) of Brigadier R. G. Lochner's 18th Brigade with the third battalion (5/5th Mahratta L.I.) of the 24th Brigade, an attached squadron of the Guides cavalry and a battery of field artillery were to cross the river from Basra and move upon Khorramshahr from the north. Simultaneously, the 1/5th Mahratta L.I. and 2/11th Sikh Regiment of Brigadier R. G. Mountain's 25th Brigade, with the 13th Lancers attached, were to advance by a yet more northerly route to 'round up' the Persian troops known to be in the vicinity of Qasr Shaikh. This movement would protect the flank of the 18th Brigade. The oilfield at Haft Khel, some forty miles east of Ahwaz, was to be secured by an airborne company of the 3/10th Baluch Regiment (18th Brigade) landed from Valentia aircraft in the early morning to ensure, as at Abadan, the safety of British subjects and employes. Furthermore, two companies of the Baluch Regiment were to land at Bandar Shahpur and seize intact the very important harbour works.

Three hundred miles further north a very different task awaited another concentration of troops which, under the direction of Major-General W. J. Slim, commanding the 10th Indian Division, was to make a much deeper penetration into Persia. The road that

crosses the frontier from Iraq to Persia near Khanaqin ascends in a series of formidable curves and twists to the Pai Tak Pass some 6,000 feet above sea level, and about twenty miles beyond the frontier. This road continues to Kermanshah, Hamadan, Kazvin and finally Teheran. It was probable that the Pai Tak Pass would be held in strength, and therefore our plan was to combine a direct approach by the road with a flanking movement from the south. One column would advance through Qasr-i-Shirin, just beyond the frontier, and press straight on towards the pass while another column proceeded via Gilan to Shahabad on the main road beyond the pass. If all went well the two columns would unite at Shahabad and then advance upon Kermanshah if necessary—and, if necessary, beyond.

At the outset a special detachment would be sent to secure the oilfield at Naft Shah, twenty-five miles S.S.E. of Khanaqin.

These operations were the primary concern of Brigadier J. A. Aizlewood, commanding the 2nd Indian Armoured Brigade, and the plan of advance was his plan. He had been obliged to part with the 13th Lancers and the squadron of the 10th Guides Cavalry which were, as we have seen, to be part of General Harvey's force in the south; so there remained to him only the obsolescent tanks, the carriers and the trucks of the 14th/20th Hussars. As reinforcement he was given lorried infantry in the shape of the 1/5th Gurkha Rifles (from the 17th Brigade) and the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles (from the 20th Brigade); and also the Warwickshire Yeomanry from the 9th Armoured Brigade, now the designation of Kingcol, which had been the spearhead of Habforce in the advance from Palestine through Habbaniya and Falluja to Baghdad in May and had then retraced its steps to lead the attack upon Palmyra in the Syrian campaign. Brigadier Aizlewood also had a field regiment and a medium battery of artillery.

Two other formations were also available. Lent by the Middle East Command the whole of the 9th Armoured Brigade, still commanded by Brigadier Tiarks (Kingstone's successor) had turned again in its tracks to take part in the Persian venture. Despite its new name 'armoured' it certainly was not, for it still moved in trucks and had no tanks. Brigadier C. J. Weld's 21st Indian Brigade, consisting of only two battalions but with a field regiment of artillery added, completed the array under General Slim.

The forces to be employed in Persia represented the maximum that Iraq Force could provide; certain units only arrived from India just in time. Troops had to be retained to guard the bases and the



ever-lengthening lines of communication and to garrison strategic points in Iraq. And some were still in the north-east corner of Syria. The provision of the transport to ensure the swift movement of the infantry made a heavy demand upon Iraq Force.

It will be realized that success depended to a very great extent upon secrecy, speed, and the synchronization of the initial movements. The failure to enforce security regulations, tardiness or untidiness in executing any part of the plan, might present the German agents and their dupes with time and opportunity to carry out acts of sabotage, the effect of which might be far reaching and even of decisive importance to the future development of our relations with Persia. Therein lay the peculiar 'needle' quality of the whole affair.

The concentration of our forces at Basra and Khanaqin was in a fair way to completion by August 12th, and the various postponements, so trying for the troops, were to deprive the operations of the advantage of surprise. Before we actually crossed the frontier it was known that the Persian Government expected some such action on our part and were reported to be despatching reinforcements, including light and medium tanks, to the region of the southern oil-fields. In this corner of the country we expected to be opposed by two infantry divisions, together with sixteen tanks and ten armoured cars and a few aircraft: we knew that the approaches to the ports were watched by three gunboats and a couple of sloops. In the Kermanshah area the Persian forces might amount to more than three divisions. These numbers sounded formidable enough. Many of the senior officers had received a military education in a European country, and considerable quantities of modern armament had been imported, mostly from the Skoda works in Czechoslovakia. Although the standard of training in the Persian Army and the state of its morale were both doubtful factors, it was not safe for us to count upon a 'walk-over'.

### From Basra in the South

At nine o'clock on the night of August 24th the 2/6th Rajputana Rifles and the 1st Kumaon Rifles moved out from their billets at Basra and began to embark in the light motor-boats—called 'Eurekas'—and paddle steamers for the fifty-mile journey downstream which was to end with the seizure of Abadan at dawn. Though the month was August and the latitude only thirty degrees north of the Equator the night was sharply cold as is the perverse

manner of the Iraq climate. The flotillas moved slowly down the river between the curtains of date-palms on either bank, the troops, who wore rubber-soled shoes for the occasion—their boots were slung upon their backs—crouched in silent readiness upon the decks.

All was quiet until at zero hour the guns of H.M.S. *Shoreham* broke the stillness of the night by opening upon a Persian sloop lying off one of the Abadan jetties. In a few minutes the craft was reduced to a blazing wreck.

The Kumaon Rifles, conveyed in the larger vessels, landed on time without much trouble and proceeded to clear the western and southern face of the Abadan refineries, working through the European bungalow quarter. Opposition was fitful and of no great account.

The passage of the Rajputana Rifles in the motorboats was beset by several minor mishaps. Some of the little craft grounded in the Shatt al Arab; and two foreign merchant ships, upon their lawful occasions, had tied up at a quay where one of our parties was to land. Thus the Rajputana companies came in with reduced numbers, and the second wave was ashore before the first.

But not unopposed. Although the majority of the Persian troops were caught unawares asleep in their barracks and, once alarmed, made off with all speed, those who manned the machine-gun posts along the quays were of sterner stuff. Our boats moved in under a brisk fire and the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel E. R. Ridley was hit in both legs, while two other British officers were mortally wounded.

The Rajputana Rifles stormed ashore. It was just after four o'clock and not yet light, so to distinguish friend from foe was not easy. And many—too many—friends were upon the scene. A janitor of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, following routine orders, had sounded the fire alarm as soon as he saw the Persian sloop ablaze: consequently the employés, both British and Persian, who left their beds promptly to hasten to their working stations were mingled with the Persian soldiery who continued to resist.

It was inevitable that a number of civilians should be killed or wounded. And here one must pause to admire the steadfast courage of these servants of the company. Throughout the day hardly one of them, whatever his race, forsook his duty. While spasmodic fighting was in progress around the big pumping station and Persian snipers were firing from the roof, work continued steadily within.

The Rajputana Rifles were much handicapped by the necessity of shepherding the defenders away from the company's buildings



which were, if possible, to be preserved intact. It was not until 6 p.m. that the whole of the oil refinery area was reported secure, and fortunately free of any but minor damage. Thus the most important task at Abadan was completed. The two Indian battalions had linked up, and at night bivouacked in a defensive perimeter in readiness to resume operations on the morrow.

Further upstream H.M.S. *Falmouth* and H.M.A.S. *Yarra* had accounted for the Persian 'navy', and before daylight a company of the Baluch Regiment landed from the warships and attacked the naval barracks at Khorramshahr. All went well here although there was some show of resistance, but one of our two casualties was the company commander, mortally wounded.

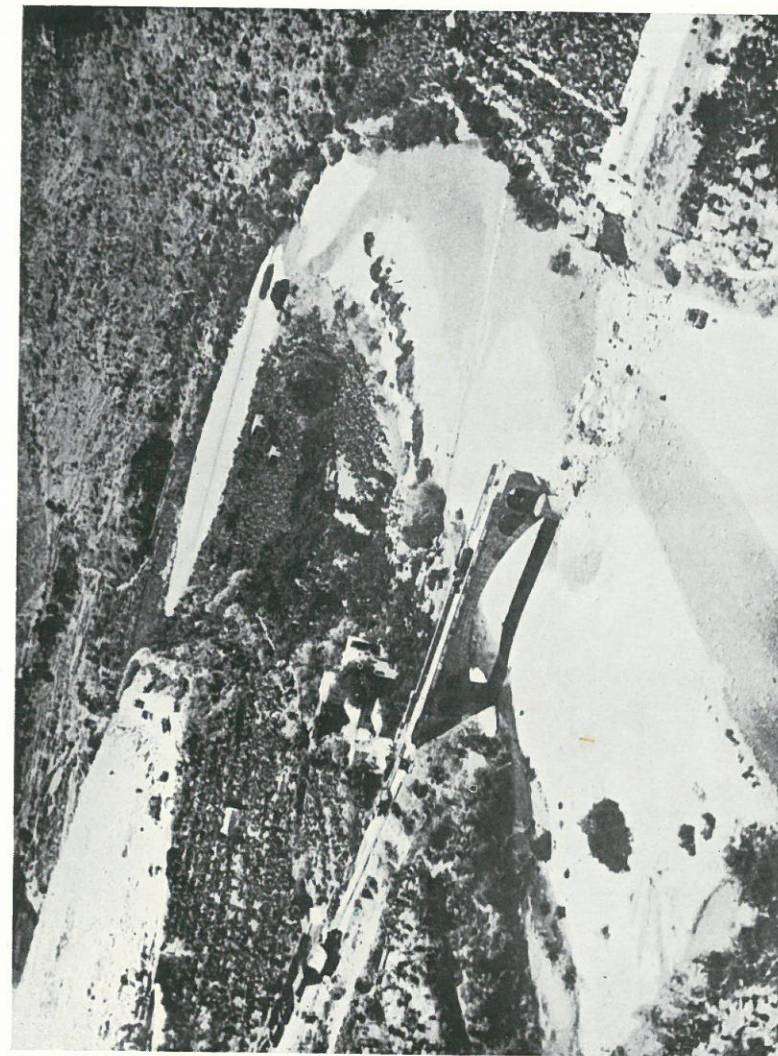
We must next follow the fortunes of the 18th Indian Brigade which had crossed the river from Basra to Tanuma and set out upon a night march of thirty-two miles across the desert with the object of descending upon Khorramshahr from the north. The town lies close to Abadan island, being separated from it only by the width of the river Karun. Having accomplished the desert drive in admirable order and without the loss of a single vehicle, the leading troops, Guides Cavalry and 5/5th Mahratta L.I. with a troop of artillery, were within a mile of Khorramshahr wireless station by dawn of the 25th. When their attack was delivered the main Persian resistance was soon overcome with the aid of the field guns and infantry mortars. Only at the wireless station was there any real trouble. This building was held by some stout fighters under Admiral Bay Endor, commander of the Persian naval forces, who, most unfortunately, was killed before the defence collapsed.

The Admiral, who had married an Englishwoman and was well disposed towards us, had not failed in what he held to be his duty. He was buried next day with full naval honours, General Harvey being present at the ceremony.

After Khorramshahr was secured the whole area was cleared by the 18th Brigade. Spasmodic but ineffective sniping by Arabs concealed in the palm groves continued for a time, but the Persian troops were anxious to surrender, though many of them seized the chance to discard their uniforms and slip away. In the course of the 25th we collected 500 prisoners and the guns of two mountain batteries.

So much for Abadan and Khorramshahr.

The advance of the 25th Indian Brigade, with Qasr Shaikh as its objective, started at 3.30 a.m., the 13th Lancers leading. Little was known about the Persian strength and dispositions and the going



Imperial War Museum

DAMOUR RIVER



was not good. Eventually the enemy was found to be entrenched a few miles south of the village, and the 2/11th Sikh Regiment was obliged to descend from its trucks and deliver a formal attack. The Lancers pressed in from the west after having already engaged some Persian armoured cars. It was about noon when Qasr Shaikh and the local fort were captured at a total cost to us of twenty-two killed and wounded. Sixty Persian dead were counted; 300 prisoners and a mountain battery were gathered in.

Away to the north-east a company of the Baluch Regiment, carried in six Valentias, had flown towards Haft Kel which lies at the foot of the mountains rising from the plain of Ahwaz. Although two of the aircraft crashed on landing they deposited their passengers shaken but unhurt. The company entered Haft Kel soon after 7 a.m. to find the small British and Indian community assembled at the manager's bungalow under a light and somewhat embarrassed guard chiefly composed of Persians who had previously been employed by their prisoners upon humble and necessary domestic duties. No resistance was offered, and there seemed so little cause for concern that even our women and children were not brought away.

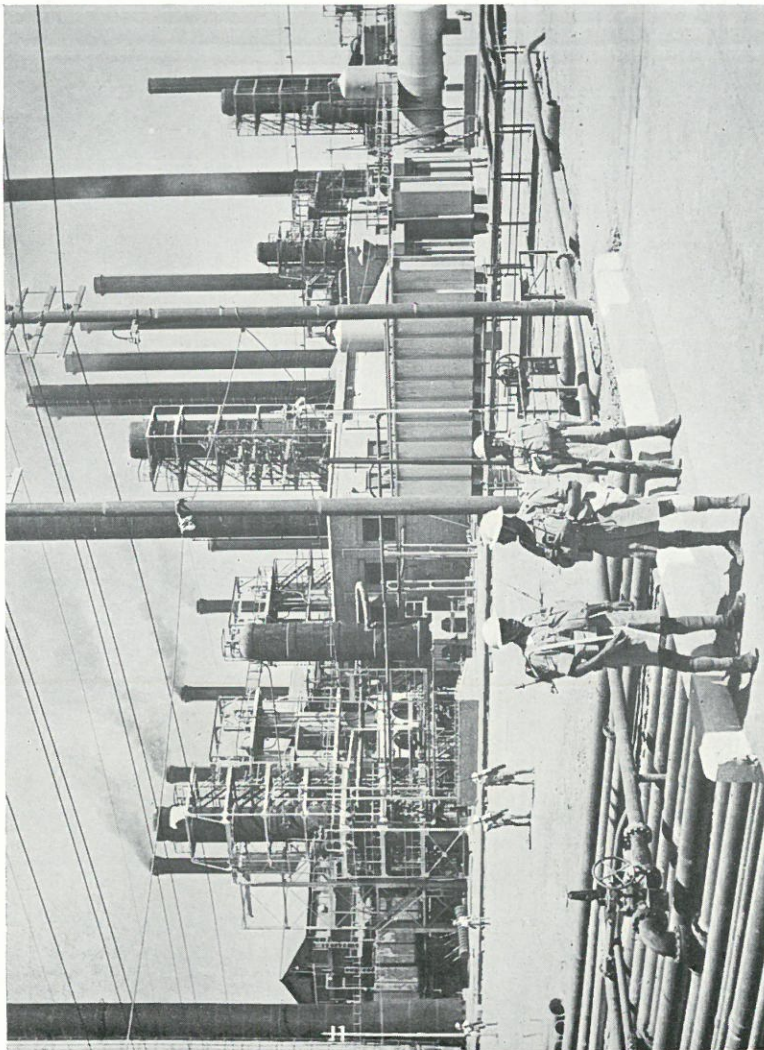
And now Bandar Shahpur.

Owing to the repeated postponement of the operations, the landing force which consisted of two companies of the Baluch battalion had been the guests of the Navy for nearly a fortnight before the event. The troops had been embarked in the Australian armed merchant cruiser *Kanimbla* as early as the night of August 11th, and thereafter had cruised about the Persian Gulf waiting for the signal to approach their objective. It was received on August 24th, and in the early hours of the following morning the convoy made for Bandar Shahpur.

Lying in the stream were eight ships belonging to the Axis partners and a couple of Persian gunboats. In view of the diplomatic moves of the past two or three weeks, the Germans and Italians were not unprepared for a British *coup de main* and had made all arrangements to scuttle their ships on news of our approach.

The little invasion fleet bore up towards the harbour. The *Kanimbla* was accompanied by some launches, tugs and a number of native dhows. As the latter were not liable to arouse suspicion it was arranged that, with the tugs, they should lead the way in. Bandar Shahpur stands at the head of an inlet and is approached round a sharp bend which effectively conceal ships moving up to it under the lee of the shore. Those on board the nearest Axis ship, the German merchantman, *Hehenfels*, viewed the approach of the first tug and

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Imperial War Museum

ABADAN: INDIAN TROOPS IN POSSESSION



the first few dhows without concern; but then it was seen that other vessels were following. The sirens sounded the alarm, but it was too late.

Accompanied by enthusiastic Australian seamen, our Indian warriors swarmed aboard the ships in a fashion reminiscent of the 'cutting out' expeditions of former days. The boarding parties carried grappling-irons and had instructions to prevent scuttling and secure the ships for our own use. While some of the attackers rounded up the crews, others, groping in the dark of the vessels' holds, turned off the seacocks, plugged holes, cut the wires of the gelignite charges; and dowsed the fires caused by tins of kerosene upset upon the decks. Without any loss of life on our side, seven of the eight Axis ships as well as two Persian gunboats were secured intact. Nor did the eighth ship escape, for its own crew set it on fire and speedily reduced it to a blackened hulk.

While the ships were being attended to, the remainder of the assault force was establishing itself ashore. The first Baluch company landed at 7.15 a.m. on August 25th, and in the face of only slight opposition had secured Bandar Shahpur by the time the second company arrived just an hour and a quarter later. We had the satisfaction of rounding up more than 300 German tourists, all clad in the sports coats and grey flannel trousers of conscientious holiday-makers, all by a curious coincidence attracted to this little port 'by the excellence of the bathing and the purity of the air.' Among other captures at this time was a plan of the harbour, complete with Italian annotations, presumably the holiday task of some carefree tourist from Genoa or Spezzia.

In a literal sense the affair at Bandar Shahpur ended in smoke; for that night the officers of one of the British ships entertained at dinner the Persian commander of the two gunboats, and amity was restored over the cheroots. The occasion was fortunately characteristic of much of this brief and, in some ways, good-tempered campaign.

It will be convenient to complete the tale of events in south-west Persia before turning our attention to what befell upon the road to Kermanshah.

Next day, August 26th, saw the 24th Indian Brigade, using the lorries of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, complete the expulsion of the Persian soldiery from the island of Abadan. There was no fighting, and more of our enemies—if enemies they could be called—wished to surrender than could conveniently be received. As it

was, our prisoners amounted to 350, and two guns and three armoured cars fell into our hands.

A ferry was completed across the river Karun so that the 18th Brigade might cross from Khorramshahr to the eastern bank. The 25th Brigade at Qasr Shaikh did not advance, but the 13th Lancers carried out a reconnaissance of the region south-west of Ahwaz.

August 27th was a day of preparation for the attack on Ahwaz, both the 18th and 25th Brigades, the one east and the other west of the Karun, moving forward to positions about twenty-five miles from the town. General Harvey proposed to attack next morning about dawn.

So, on August 28th, both brigades raced forward in the growing light. The fire from all arms which greeted them was particularly heavy against the 25th Brigade; but good progress was made, a frontal advance on foot being combined with swift movement round the Persian flanks. Ahwaz stood in danger of envelopment when the first Persian envoy appeared to proclaim the end of all resistance. A more impressive functionary then drove up in a luxurious limousine decked in white streamers like a wedding car. It was indeed the end, for the Shah had ordered it so. The Persian troops emerged from their trenches, piled into trucks and buses and drove furiously for Ahwaz. Their officers, in cars and cabs, did likewise.

General Harvey entered the town later in the day to be received with due ceremony by the Persian commander, General Muhammad Shahbakhti. It may be said that there were no 'hard feelings'. Arrangements were made for the withdrawal of the Persian forces, and our Indian troops occupied Ahwaz on August 30th.

In the whole four days' operations our losses amounted to seven British and two Indian officers, fifty Indian and two British 'other ranks'.

General Harvey was prompt to express his thanks for naval assistance both at the Abadan and Bandar Shahpur landings and afterwards when 800 men and a large quantity of supplies were transported up the Karun river although the water was so low that no craft drawing more than three feet could be used.

The R.A.F. also had played their part. A squadron of Blenheims bombed the aerodromes at Ahwaz where at least eight aircraft were destroyed on the ground; and on August 27th the only Persian machine which did get up was speedily shot down. The value of our air reconnaissance, unhampered by hostile interference, may be imagined.



## Khanaqin to Hamadan

MAJOR-GENERAL W. J. Slim arrived at Khanaqin on August 24th to assume command. All was ready for the advance into Persia and he had only to approve Brigadier Aizlewood's plan.

In step with the operations conducted from Basra the first moves were made by the 2nd Indian Armoured Brigade on the night of August 24th. At 4.30 a.m. on the 25th the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles secured the Naft Shah oil centre, meeting with little opposition.

The advance on Qasr-i-Shirin also went well. During the night the 14th/20th Hussars—as we shall see one squadron was employed elsewhere—had negotiated difficult country in order to envelop the village. By half-past seven on the morning of the 25th they had a detachment astride the Kermanshah road east of Qasr-i-Shirin. In the meantime the 1/5th Gurkha Rifles had driven up the main road from Khanaqin and at the frontier post of Khusrawi had grabbed the entire force of gendarmerie and customs officials who were asleep in their beds. This was accomplished soon after five o'clock without a shot being fired.

The Gurkhas pressed on towards Qasr-i-Shirin, whence the defenders fled as the infantry leapt from their lorries and the tanks and carriers of the Hussars closed in. The inhabitants were friendly, and by half-past eight Hussars and Gurkhas had resumed the advance. They were sniped at, but the road-blocks which delayed the march lacked defenders, and in the afternoon the column entered into peaceful possession of Sar-i-Pul Zuhab where it harboured for the night. We were well on the way to the formidable Pai Tak Pass.

The other column had crossed the frontier at 6 a.m. and moved across country to strike the road leading south-eastward to Gilan. This force, which was headed by a squadron of the 14th/20th Hussars and the Warwickshire Yeomanry, had orders to reach the main road at Shahabad, well beyond the pass.

At first the land appeared to be deserted. It was desolate and uninviting. Later the way led through green valleys dappled with shade, by wooded mountain slopes and flowing streams, an agreeable contrast to the sun-baked deserts of Iraq. People were seen at work in the fields. Those of the inhabitants who came out to watch our progress were, for the most part ragged and under-nourished. Though timorous they were not unfriendly. Perhaps their resentment was reserved for the officials of their own Government who had

produced an un-natural food shortage by selling a high proportion of the wheat crop to Germany.

About noon carriers of the Hussars and a squadron of the Yeomanry entered Gilan; but progress along the road beyond was checked by the fire of machine guns, anti-tank guns and field artillery in positions along a ridge lying south-east of the village. Our guns came into action during the afternoon but repeated attempts of our tanks to outflank the enemy ended in failure. One of the Persian anti-tank guns was rushed and put out of action, but it proved difficult to locate the others and further effort was stayed by the fall of darkness.

General Slim at once determined that the advance from Gilan should be made in greater force. The column at Sar-i-Pul Zuhab was moved southward early in the morning of the 26th to join the troops at Gilan. The 9th Armoured Brigade was ordered up as well, and followed in rear. On the main road the 21st Indian Brigade was pushed through Sari-i-Pul Zuhab and directed straight on towards the Pai Tak Pass.

At Gilan, however, carrier reconnaissance on the morning of the 26th disclosed the fact that the Persians had abandoned their position on the ridge. At noon our advance was resumed. Although the road was blocked by frequent anti-tank obstacles, of active opposition there was none. Progress, if not so swift as could be wished, was steady and Shahabad was entered on the morning of the 27th. Since leaving Gilan not a shot had been fired and we were now on the Kermanshah road some thirty-five miles in rear of the Pai Tak Pass.

But that formidable position had already ceased to trouble us. On the 26th the 21st Indian Brigade had deployed in front of the pass which appeared to be held in considerable strength; but before expending British and Indian lives in an assault the Royal Air Force was called upon for a persuasive effort. Blenheims, appearing in flights of thirty, swept over the mountain ridges on the afternoon and evening of the 26th, bombing selected positions. The effect was all that could be desired, for when day dawned on the 27th it was discovered that the defenders had abandoned the pass and melted away eastward.

Resuming its march, the 21st Brigade entered Karind where it met patrols of the 9th Armoured Brigade which had come north-westward from Shahabad. The main column had started for Kermanshah but was only to reach its destination after one more argument with the Persian Army.



Eight miles from Shahabad the leading truck of the Warwickshire Yeomanry ran into an ambush. The occupants of the truck were captured—although all but one promptly made their escape—and a few men in the following vehicle were hit. The Persians were holding a position in the neighbourhood of Zibiri where the approaches were steep and difficult, and their artillery kept the road under shell-fire until a late hour. Preparations were therefore made to attack on the morning of the 28th.

This attack was never delivered. In the morning a Persian officer drove in with a white flag to suggest that as the whole campaign would be over so soon further bloodshed might well be avoided; he added that his own horsed regiment of cavalry had received orders to deliver a charge against our flank at noon that day. Persian cavalry were certainly in evidence, and one may be thankful that no such sacrifice of brave men and fine horses actually occurred.

The Shah having ordered his Army to cease hostilities on all fronts, a more formal offer of a suspension of arms was soon received. The Persian commander undertook to withdraw his troops from Kermanshah if he were given until September 1st to do so. This was hardly good enough, for it seemed to promise time and opportunity for German saboteurs to work their will. General Slim, who had arrived at Zibiri, therefore refused the proposal: he required that the Persian troops should begin to leave their forward positions at 2 p.m., their progressive withdrawal to be followed up by our own troops, and that Kermanshah should be surrendered by 6 a.m. on August 30th. Otherwise our projected attack would go in.

The Persian acceptance was received with little delay and in the afternoon General Slim drove into Kermanshah, passing on the way a long column of retreating Persian troops. They looked very tired. In the evening our commander exchanged civilities with the Persian General Muquadam.

Our troops occupied the area of the oil refinery on August 29th and on the 30th Kermanshah itself where a 'victory march' took place. On the same day we pushed on to Hamadan.

At Hamadan we received reports that Russians had arrived in Sinneh, about 100 miles away to the north-west. That same afternoon a small column which included the 1/5th Gurkha Rifles and a detachment of the 15th Field Regiment was despatched under the command of Colonel J. G. Pocock to meet our allies. The interpreter with this force was a White Russian, a naturalised Persian in the employ of the Oil Company. A large Union flag was carried.

Speeding ahead in his car, Colonel Pocock reached Sinneh well

after dark and met the Russians who were re-entering the town from the north. Their column, which consisted of three armoured cars and four truck-loads of troops had first entered Sinneh at two o'clock that afternoon and, after inspecting the barracks and the telephone exchange, had departed on a tour of the surrounding country. Compliments were exchanged between Colonel Pocock and the Russian commander, and at 10.30 a.m. our Allies left for their headquarters which were about 125 miles away to the north.

This incident deserves to be remembered as the first meeting of our troops with those of the Soviet Union.

As the Russians had freely distributed portraits of Stalin about Sinneh it was thought advisable to impress the fact of our presence upon the populace by showing the flag in a march through the streets and halting our field guns for a time in the centre of the town. Those of the people who had fled to the hills before the advancing Russians soon returned, shops re-opened, and a general feeling of confidence and security was restored.

So General Slim's forces, like those of General Harvey in the south, had accomplished swiftly and successfully, and at little cost, the task which they had been set to do. It can truly be said that our operations had been conducted with all possible humanity, for it was our consistent aim to manœuvre the Persian troops out of their positions rather than force them to stand and fight. Our propaganda, effectively conducted both in this region and in the south by leaflets dropped from the air, was concerned to point out that we came to bring Persia solid and calculable benefits, which was true enough, and to prevent the Germans from 'preying upon the country like starving locusts'.

## Reluctant Ruler

WHILE we had been busy in south-western and western Persia the Russian columns had been driving down from the north without let or hindrance. Their Caspian column had occupied Ardebil; the other, moving further to the west, had reached Tabriz on August 26th. Next day Urmia was occupied.

It was clear by then that, in the face of such overwhelming force as the Russians and British could deploy, Persian resistance could mean only a futile loss of life. The Shah could hardly fail to recognize this, and on the morning of August 25th, when news of the invasion



had been received, he sent for Sir Reader Bullard and M. Smirnov, the British and Russian Ambassadors, and offered to expel all German subjects—save for a few technicians—in return for the halting of the Allied advance. This proposal the representatives of the two Powers were unable to accept: it was just that handful of technicians whom it was most desirable to send packing; so for three more days operations continued. Then there was a change of Cabinet at Teheran, and the 'Cease Fire' was ordered.

Only two circumstances could have enabled the Shah to maintain resistance with any hope of even the most temporary and negative success. One would have been the active intervention of Germany; the other a *démarche* by Turkey.

But Germany had no armed forces nearer than the Dneiper, a thousand miles away with the not inconsiderable obstacle of the Caucasus ranges between; she could operate from no air base nearer than the Dodecanese. So nothing emerged from Germany but routine denunciations of the British and Russians. And to Riza Shah Pahlevi the combined forces of Doctor Goebbels, William Joyce, and the *Deutschlandsender* announcer speaking in Arabic were an inadequate substitute for the presence of German military might.

Turkey, though formally allied to Britain, feared Russia even more than she feared Germany, with whom she had signed trade and non-aggression pacts. The Turkish press and radio condemned the Anglo-Russian intervention in terms of the bitterest hostility. But there was never any likelihood of Turkey herself taking any action on behalf of Persia or granting a passage to German troops across Anatolia, had the latter proposal been made. In fact, her diplomatic course was scrupulously correct. She refrained from any provocative action and even took steps to close her frontier against 'undesirable alien refugees' from Persia. By the end of the week the whole affair was over and we were able to present Turkey with a *fait accompli* and, what was much better, additional assurance that she could not be subjected to an attack from the rear into Kurdistan and Anatolia.

The terms by which hostilities were brought to a close (there had never been a declaration of war, and the British and Russian Embassies had remained in Teheran throughout the four days) included the temporary occupation by the two Allies of certain specific areas, the evacuation of all Germans from the country and the granting of all facilities to permit the flow of war material to Russia. In return for this latter concession we undertook to ease the economic situation of Persia, unnecessarily strained by the *folie de grandeur*

of the Shah, and as a preliminary token 700 tons of wheat were sent into the occupied area in the south of the country.

## Aftermath

THERE is a prolonged and rather unedifying epilogue to this tale. It was soon clear that both the Shah and certain of his more chauvinistic subjects hoped to temporize and possibly to sow dissension between the Allies; and that the Germans in Persia hoped to profit thereby.

On August 30th there had been an ugly scene at the headquarters of the Persian Air Force. A number of officers mutinied as a protest against the 'Cease Fire' and two pilots actually threatened to fly over Teheran and bomb the capital as a means of bringing pressure to bear on their Government to renew the struggle. It was not until martial law had been proclaimed and the Chief of the Air Force summarily shot that the disturbances died down.

The spotlight of trouble next focused on Kurdistan. The Kurds are a primitive, turbulent people dwelling in western Persia, northern Iraq and eastern Turkey. When the Persian army received orders that resistance was at an end, it seems that many of the soldiers sold or otherwise disposed of their arms to the Kurdish tribesmen. At any rate the 'Cease Fire' was soon followed by suspiciously synchronized disturbances near the western frontier. Troops from the 9th Armoured Brigade and 21st Indian Brigade were required for policing duties and to protect our lines of communication between Khanaqin and Kermanshah from sporadic raiding parties.

In Teheran it would have been difficult to tell during the early days of September whether the diplomatic victory in Persia rested with the British and Russian Governments or with the Axis. Von Ettel was still ostentatiously active at the German Embassy; German citizens swaggered about the streets or raced through them in high-powered cars; British subjects were publicly insulted in restaurants and cafés; British Press correspondents who had arrived in the capital found themselves compelled—it was a lunatic situation—to submit to a censorship that was directly controlled by the Nazis!

It was not a situation that could be allowed to continue, but several days elapsed before it became accepted that the expulsions must extend to Axis Embassies, Legations and Consulates, as well as to private residents, 'tourists' and 'technicians'. Then, following a visit from General Wavell to the Russian commander-in-chief in



northern Persia, a necessary and overdue stiffening could be noted. It was announced that a joint advance upon Teheran by the Russian and British forces would be undertaken. This was carried out according to plan, and in the afternoon of September 17th Allied contingents entered the capital simultaneously, the Russians from the east and west, the British from the south. On the previous day the Shah announced his abdication on the grounds of failing health and was succeeded by his son, the Crown Prince, Muhammad Riza Pahlevi.

The German Embassy, without a winning card in its hand, had played a delaying game with considerable skill and some apparent enjoyment. It had been agreed with the Persian Government that the Axis Legations should be closed and their personnel expelled, while the non-diplomatic members of the German colony should be turned over to the British and Russians for internment. But the execution of this demand was perpetually delayed. The German Legation was found to have increased its numbers to a ridiculous extent, and the departure of this cavalcade was postponed on such frivolous pretexts as the necessity for the Germans to complete their shopping before leaving the country. Only the news of the approach of the Allied columns caused them to take thought for their departure, and when the first Legation train pulled out of the station on September 16th it carried less than a third of the persons who were supposed to have travelled. The remainder left on September 18th, by which time our troops and those of the Russians were already in the city. So von Ettel was able to depart cocking a metaphorical snook at the Allies: yet such a gesture was little more than a school-boy irrelevance, for the victory rested patently with Britain and Russia and the consequences were solid and far-reaching.

Iraq, Syria, and now Persia—the three-act drama of the Middle Eastern summer of 1941 was complete. Each country had represented a potential tool in the hands of Nazi diplomacy, and eventually, perhaps, a jumping-off ground for Nazi armies to attack our Middle East bastion, preserved during the previous twelve months by the skill, ingenuity and *sang froid* of Wavell, and the fighting qualities of his exiguous and far-flung forces.

Iraq Force, renamed 'Persia and Iraq Force' (Paiforce) at the beginning of September, had placed yet another achievement to the credit of the Indian Army. The Indian battalions, containing many young soldiers who had been hastily trained and who lacked experience of war, had behaved in exemplary fashion. Their fighting spirit was never in question; they showed themselves readily adaptable to

novel conditions; and they reached a surprising standard of technical efficiency in handling the armament and equipment of modern war.

Apart from its occupation duties, Paiforce was called upon to undertake a fresh task after the expulsion of the Germans from the Shah's domains. In the wild northern regions of Iraq and Persia the troops were soon engaged on the preparation of defensive positions as an insurance against a German penetration by way of Anatolia or the Caucasus.

And in order to prepare the routes from the Gulf to the Caspian, and to conduct and maintain the traffic of armaments and supplies which were to pass along them in ever-increasing volume to Russia's aid, men of many nations—Persians included—were working and continued to work with dogged endurance at the base ports and on the railways and the roads. But that is another story.



MADAGASCAR  
1942



## CHAPTER I

# DIEGO SUAREZ

### Prologue

THE summer of 1941 had seen the clearance of our flanks in the Middle East. Italian East Africa had been overrun in a brilliant campaign by British, South African, Indian, East and West African, and Sudanese troops and the patriot forces of Abyssinia. Military action had eliminated German influence in Iraq in May, in Syria during a five-weeks' campaign during June and July, and in Persia at the end of August. Direct contact by land with Turkey and with Caucasian Russia was now secured and with quickening tempo the war material brought by our convoys was being off-loaded at Bandar Shahpur and Basra and carried by the Trans-Iranian railway and by road across to the Caspian ports and southern Russia.<sup>1</sup> Now at last it might seem that the various diversions which had distracted the attention of the Commander-in-Chief Middle East from his main front in the Western Desert had been neatly, and generally economically, brought to an end. Surely General Auchinleck in pursuance of the strategy of the British War Cabinet could now devote his undivided and reinforced command to the drive westward which should destroy the Axis forces in Libya, reoccupy Benghazi, penetrate to Tripoli and eject the enemy from his last foothold in the continent of Africa.

But world war, like peace, is indivisible. The struggle for power, the struggle between two conceptions of international justice, that had begun over the technical issue of the status of the free city of Danzig had engulfed Europe, overlapped into Africa and the western fringes of Asia and now burst out in a new and threatening form in the Far East. For ten years Japan had given clear evidence of aggressive designs in eastern Asia; throughout 1941 her military preparations and the excessively bellicose attitude of her Government towards Britain and America, her open and declared alliance

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map A.



with the aggressor States, Germany and Italy, and her absorption of French Indo-China, pointed to the probability of yet another extension of the war which might range every major Power in the world on one side or the other.

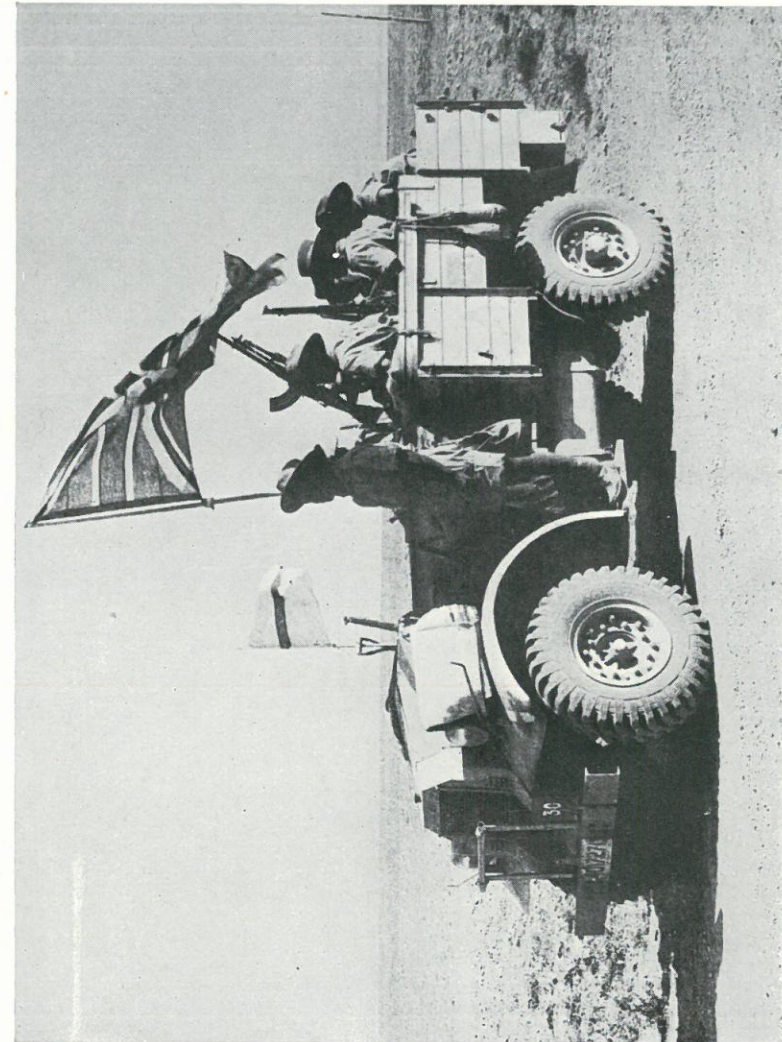
It came at dawn on Sunday, December 7th, when scores of Japanese aircraft swooped down upon the great American naval base of Pearl Harbour in the mid-Pacific. Eight battleships, three cruisers, three destroyers, and a number of other vessels were sunk or seriously damaged; some thousands of Americans were killed, wounded or drowned. Almost at the same time Japanese troops invaded Hong Kong territory and the Malay peninsula, and a state of war was declared with the United States of America and with Great Britain.

The details of the subsequent campaigns which rapidly brought Japan almost total mastery of the south-west Pacific, are not to be related here. Hong Kong, and later the Philippine Islands, fell to the aggressor. The whole of the Malay peninsula and the island naval base of Singapore, 'the gateway of the Pacific', were in Japanese hands by February 15th, 1942. The Dutch East Indies followed very soon after. Then the Andaman islands in the Indian Ocean. Already by March Colombo, the port of Ceylon, was threatened, and as the Japanese armies moved into Burma while their aircraft and submarines ranged further and further afield, the disastrous possibility that the advanced guards of our new enemy from the East might join forces with those of our old enemy from the West in the Persian Gulf, perhaps even at the Suez Canal, became more and more apparent.

Our main supply route to the Middle East and to India and one of the two routes of supply to Russia was by sea round the Cape, thence northward up the east coast of Africa. Now the alarming scale of Japanese victories induced the fear that hostile submarines, aircraft, and surface vessels, passing westward across the Indian Ocean might soon threaten the security of our sea communications to Suez and the Persian Gulf.<sup>1</sup>

Here emerges the importance of Madagascar—third largest of the islands of the world—set in the Indian Ocean and separated from the African coast by the Mozambique Channel through which most of our convoys passed. At the northern tip of the island is the large harbour of Diego Suarez, almost equi-distant from Cape Town and Colombo (it is about 2,000 miles from each) and rather nearer to Aden than to either. The modern port, completed as recently as 1935, was well fortified by coastal batteries, and the deep-water harbour

<sup>1</sup> Endpaper map B.



Imperial War Museum

PERSIA: OFF TO MEET THE RUSSIANS





Imperial War Museum

DIEGO SUAREZ HARBOUR

was adequate to hold all the ships of the Japanese navy. Possessed of such a base as Diego Suarez our enemy would be in a position to keep our vital sea route under constant attack by naval and air forces. This could not be allowed to happen, and there was only one way to prevent it.

Madagascar was a possession of France—of Vichy France. On December 1st, 1941, just six days before Japan opened the war in the Far East, the Chiefs of Staff had reported to the Cabinet that, if Japan entered the struggle on the side of the Axis Powers, the Vichy Government was likely to allow both Germany and Japan to make use of Madagascar to forward their strategic purpose. Acting on this advice the War Cabinet had decided to prepare an adequate force—calculated at one infantry brigade, a brigade of Royal Marines, and two commandos, with a supporting air squadron—for the purpose of occupying Diego Suarez. Additional air support would be provided by the Royal Navy.

On December 23rd, Major-General R. G. Sturges, Royal Marines, was notified that he would be in command of the land forces of this amphibious operation. By that date the situation in the Far East was already one of unrelieved gloom. Hong Kong was on the very point of surrender, the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle-cruiser *Repulse* had been sunk; the Japanese were in the Philippines and had already taken Penang in their advance down the Malay peninsula. There seemed little time to spare if we were to forestall Japan in Madagascar as Germany had been forestalled in Iraq, in Syria and in Persia.

Our original intention was to undertake the enterprise at the beginning of April 1942, but the enormous demands upon British shipping during that grim winter put difficulties in the way. There was also our ever-present problem of where to find the troops, and we catch once more the echo of the considerations that had been advanced by Wavell before the Iraq and Syria campaigns; unless the force were of adequate strength we might provoke another Dakar—or at best another Syria—and could we spare the troops without starving Burma or Libya, or depleting the forces that might be called upon in the coming months to defend Syria-Iraq-Persia against a German aggression from the north.

At home we had the 29th Independent Brigade, commanded by Brigadier F. W. Festing, which had reached an advanced state of training for amphibious operations—that is, carrying out an opposed landing from the sea. This brigade consisted of four battalions. It became the nucleus of the Madagascar force, known as 'Force 121',



and was to be the spearhead of the operation. Before leaving England No. 5 Commando, a special service squadron of tanks (six Valentines, six light tanks called Tetrarchs), the 455th Light Battery R.A. (four 3.7-inch howitzers and two 25-pdrs., tractor drawn), and the 145th Light A.A. Troop (four Bofors guns) were placed under the command of the brigade.

Also in England was the 5th Division preparing to embark for India, where it might be badly needed. Yet it must now part, in all secrecy, with a third of its establishment to build up Force 121. Brigadier G. W. B. Tarleton's 17th Brigade Group (three battalions, a field regiment of artillery and a field company of engineers) was selected. It had had no experience of, or training for, landing operations.

The 29th Independent Brigade Group and the whole of the 5th Division left England in a large convoy during the latter half of March 1942 and reached Freetown, on the west coast of Africa, early in April. Here was the rendezvous with the naval forces which, under the command of Rear-Admiral E. N. Syfret, had sailed from Gibraltar. The composition of the fleet varied from time to time and was reinforced after the expedition reached the Cape. Eventually under Admiral Syfret's command were the battleship *Ramillies*, the aircraft carriers *Illustrious* and *Indomitable*, the cruisers *Devonshire* and *Hermione*, eleven destroyers, six mine-sweepers, six corvettes and a number of auxiliaries.

Among the transports was a newcomer to combined operations, a 'tank landing ship'. In 1940 the Prime Minister had called for a vessel seaworthy enough to make an ocean voyage, yet of such shallow draught as to be able to discharge tanks direct to the shore. The immediate answer was found in a type of tanker specially built to negotiate the bar at the entrance to the Maracaibo channel in Venezuela. One of these vessels, the S.S. *Bachaquero*, was present with the expedition; but she did not carry tanks. When her time came she was delivered of a battery of 25-pdrs. and six trucks.

Until they met at Freetown the naval and military commanders had had no opportunity to discuss plans, but, as will be seen, the two services worked in complete accord throughout. To a very large degree success depended upon secrecy. At Freetown it was decided that the 'covering' rumours should be of an intended operation in the Bay of Bengal, and the recapture of Rangoon by the 5th Division. The next port of call was stated to be Colombo.

The ships left Freetown in two convoys, the first, and faster, one carrying the 29th Independent Brigade Group and the 17th Brigade

Group. Now ensued some weeks of anxiety, for any hint of the destination of the expedition would certainly have caused the French to make defensive preparations at Diego Suarez and might possibly have led them to open the port to the Japanese. It must be remembered that the aggressive incursion of the Japanese into Indian waters was in progress at the time. Mr. Churchill confessed subsequently in the House of Commons that he felt a shiver every time he saw the word 'Madagascar' in print. Much speculation was rife at this time about the next Japanese move and about the means of countering it; and some of this, as is the way with intelligent speculation, was only too accurate. However, such measures as were taken to disarm suspicion appear to have served their purpose, for no special precautions were taken during these last weeks for the defence of the port which was our objective.

A further demand had been made upon the 5th Division, the 13th Brigade Group (Brigadier V. C. Russell) being earmarked for Force 121, but only to be used in case of necessity, seeing that the 5th Division was urgently needed in India. Thus for the seizure of Diego Suarez, called 'Operation Ironclad', General Sturges now had at his disposal a considerable force which was assured of adequate naval and air support.

It was estimated (correctly, as it transpired) that the Vichy forces in the whole of Madagascar amounted to no more than 8,000, of whom about three-quarters were native Malgache. While full mobilization could theoretically expand this figure to some 30,000 it was doubtful whether the increased numbers could be properly armed or equipped or would be capable of offering any very serious opposition. At Diego Suarez itself there were not more than 1,500 to 3,000 troops, including natives, to man the fortifications which included eight—we believed that there were nine—coastal batteries of heavy guns covering the harbour and the adjacent bays.

The naval and air forces at the disposal of the French commander at Diego Suarez were by no means strong. In the harbour were one or two escort vessels and sloops, two armed merchant cruisers and about five submarines. As regards the air, seventeen 'Morane 406' fighters were believed to be based on the aerodrome of Diego Suarez, and a further ten 'Potez 63' bombers with eight more obsolete bombers were at Ivato airfield near Tananarive, the capital, in the centre of the island.

On April 19th the first convoy reached Cape Town, where the naval and military commanders conferred with General Smuts who, of course, was in the confidence of the British War Cabinet. The



South African Premier pointed out that the seizure of Diego Suarez would not, by itself, be a guarantee against Japanese aggression: Majunga on the west coast and Tamatave on the east coast were both ports of some value and should be occupied also. He undertook to signal his views to London, and on the following day the convoy continued its voyage to Durban.

There was much to do at Durban, which became the advanced base of the expedition.<sup>1</sup> The re-fuelling of ships, waterproofing of vehicles, testing of landing-craft, distribution of maps and information—all such preparations were urged forward. The transports of the 17th Brigade Group had not been 'tactically loaded': that is to say they were loaded to economize shipping space rather than to ensure that the troops who were to land first would do so with their support weapons and the equipment, transport and stores they were likely to need from the outset. Considerable re-stowage and some redistribution of troops to transports was therefore necessary. Also the opportunity was taken to give the men of the 17th Brigade some practice with the landing-craft to which they were total strangers. The 13th Brigade, which was equally lacking in this kind of experience, did not even receive orders to take part in Operation Ironclad until its arrival at Durban on April 26th.

In the midst of these activities, Admiral Syfret and General Sturges received a request from London for an estimate of the possibility of taking Majunga and Tamatave either concurrently with or shortly after the capture of Diego Suarez. This obviously represented a considerable widening of the original intention, but the two commanders replied that these additional commitments could be undertaken provided that the 13th Brigade were permanently allotted to the Force and that opposition at Diego Suarez were overcome by the evening of the day of landing. Consideration was given in London to this possibility and it was less than twenty-four hours prior to the opening of the actual assault that the commanders learned that the operation against Majunga and Tamatave would be held in abeyance, owing to the urgent need for hastening the passage of the 13th Brigade to India. General Alexander's fighting retreat from Burma was drawing to a close and measures had now to be taken for the defence of Bengal and Assam against invasion. For the time being, therefore, the exigencies of our military situation must limit our objective in Madagascar merely to the port which provided the most obvious and tempting bait to the Japanese enemy.

<sup>1</sup> The 5th Division (less the 17th and 13th Brigade Groups) did not call at Durban but proceeded to Mombasa and thence to Bombay.

The harbour of Diego Suarez lies on the eastern side of the island, very close to the northern tip, and is entered through a narrow strait, barely a mile wide, which is commanded by coastal batteries. The small town of Diego Suarez, however, as well as the naval dockyard of Antsirane, just across the water on the southern side of the inlet, can be reached overland from the west without much difficulty, since the tapering end of the island is at this point a mere ten or eleven miles wide.

The plan of attack involved the landing of the assault forces on the western side of this northern tip, where a number of beaches provided a relatively easy disembarkation. No. 5 Commando with one company of the 2nd East Lancashire under command would go ashore in Courrier Bay on three beaches known as Red Beaches—North, Centre and South—while the 29th Brigade would land further south at three beaches called respectively Blue, White and Green, Green Beach being near the village of Ambararata. The landings having been effected and the coastal batteries (of which there were believed to be two, but actually proved to be only one) in the neighbourhood having been silenced, the force would move in two columns across the isthmus. From Courrier Bay the commando would take the direct route to Diego Suarez, a distance of not more than ten or eleven miles; from Ambararata the 29th Brigade, supported by tanks, would advance by the single road to Antsirane, which lay just opposite Diego Suarez on the southern side of the great harbour. When both places were captured, the third and final phase of the operation would be undertaken: an attack by the land forces, supported by the naval guns, against the headland of Orangea.<sup>1</sup>

The first duty of the carrier-borne aircraft would be to drop copies of a leaflet, signed by Admiral Syfret, addressed to His Excellency the Governor of Diego Suarez, requesting him to avoid bloodshed by surrendering the territory under his control: the purpose of our action was fully explained in this message which sought co-operation and disclaimed any idea of conquest. A reply was asked for by radio, or by the hand of an officer with a flag of truce to the officer commanding our occupying forces.

Then, as our troops landed, our aircraft would attack the airfield situated five miles south of Antsirane in order to put out of action such Vichy aircraft as might attempt to interfere with our movements.

To distract the attention of the defenders and mislead them with regard to the direction from which the assault might be expected an

<sup>1</sup> Map 12.



elaborate diversion was planned. H.M. cruiser *Hermione* was to lie off the eastern approaches of the harbour and carry out a mock bombardment of Ambodi Vahibe Bay,<sup>1</sup> the most likely alternative landing-place. Meanwhile dummy parachutists would be dropped in a broad valley a little distance inland.

General Sturges had been responsible for one modification of the original plan. It had been intended that the position at the beaches should be thoroughly consolidated and the maximum of support weapons brought ashore before any serious attempt was made to penetrate towards Diego Suarez or Antsirane. This second phase of the operation was timed for the second or third day. Sturges urged that speed in exploitation was a necessary corollary to surprise in assault, and a swift advance with only limited support from tanks or field guns was to be preferred to a slower, if more powerful, build-up which, by delay, might throw away most of the advantage gained. He was undoubtedly right, and the plan was amended accordingly.

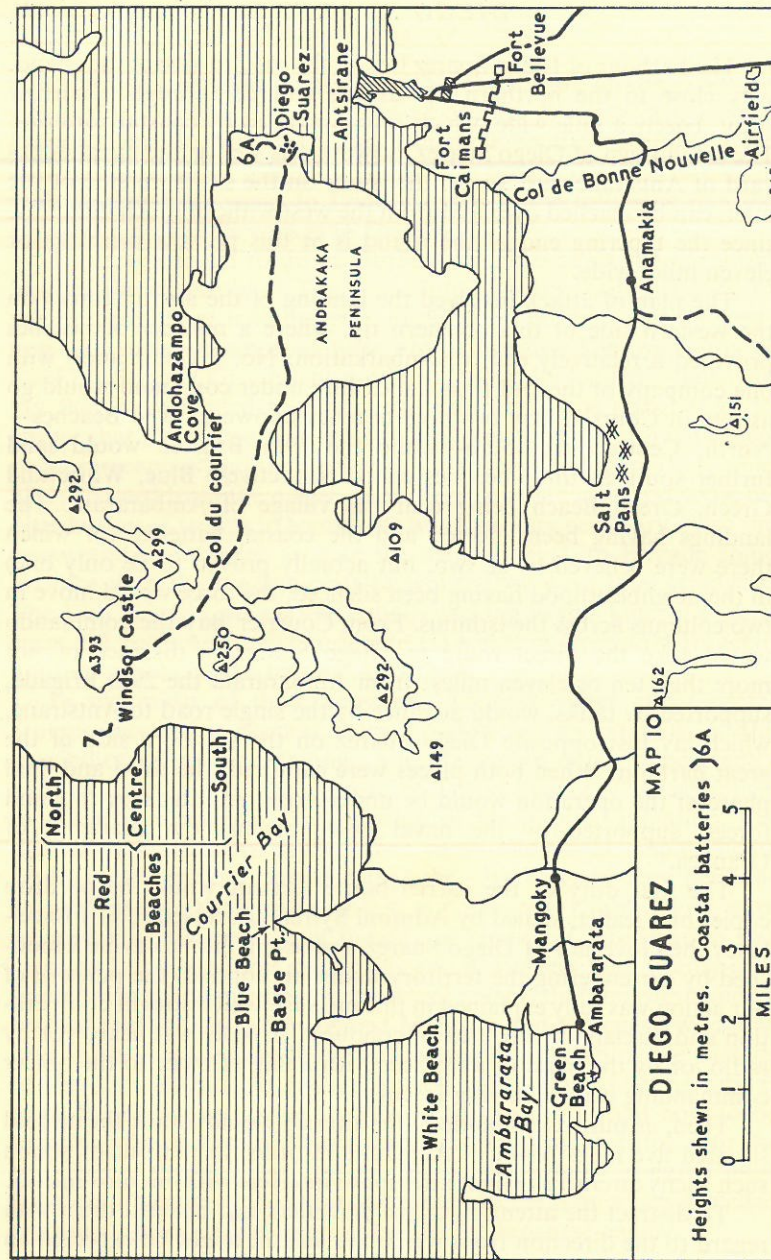
At Durban no word had been divulged about the real objective of the expedition, and the Middle East was mentioned freely with the intention to mislead; but Admiral Syfret noted with some concern that 'Madagascar was a popular topic of conversation ashore and from many sources people were heard guessing or asserting that it was the convoy's destination'. To shrewd observers watching the activity and movement from ship to ship and from ship to shore and back again it seemed clear that a fairly short sea passage was to be followed by an assault landing. Before sailing for Madagascar a routine conference had named Mombasa as the final destination; but a secret demonstration of the actual landings gave the true objective to a number of naval and military officers and to the masters of the merchant vessels in the expedition.

To ensure a synchronized arrival of the shipping, the fleet was divided into a slow and a fast convoy. The former left Durban on April 25th, the latter on the 28th. It was May 1st before the final authorization to carry out the assault was received from the Admiralty, so not until the following morning could operation orders be issued for the landings that were to take place three days later, beginning at 4.30 a.m., about eighty minutes before sunrise.

## Three Days

UNDER ideal weather conditions both convoys made good speed up the Mozambique Channel and in the calm moonlight of Monday,

<sup>1</sup> Map 13.





May 4th, they drew in towards their objective. The final stretch of the run in to Courrier Bay and Ambararata was particularly difficult, for it abounded in small islands, reefs and shoals, and the three available channels of approach had been mined by the French.

Admiral Syfret had organized his fleet in five groups. The first, which included the battleship *Ramillies*, the two aircraft carriers and eight of the destroyers, took position ready to engage the coastal batteries or supply covering fire to the assault troops as need might arise. The second group, composed mainly of the mine-sweepers, cleared and buoyed the approach channels. The remainder of the fleet, including all the transports and assault craft were divided into three groups corresponding to the various beaches at which they were to land their men. No lights, except certain necessary guiding lights, were allowed, reliance being placed upon the moon which was almost at the full.

The very difficulty of approach proved, as is not uncommonly the case in war, an additional safeguard to the attackers. Courrier Bay and Ambararata were defended by a single coastal battery, surmounted by an observation post on an imposing height known in our reports as 'Windsor Castle', and by a few machine-gun posts. A French *mémoire militaire*, captured on the day of the assault, states that 'Firing at night is not contemplated, the entrance to the bay being considered impossible at night'.

Whoever drafted that passage had taken little account of the navigational skill of the Royal Navy.

No hint of the impending attack seems to have reached the watchers at Windsor Castle on that calm and moonlit Monday night. Everything was as usual and no instructions had been received to adopt any special precautionary measures. Convoys passing through the Mozambique Channel were, after all, no novelty in those days. It was true that Madagascar had been somewhat in the news of late, and M. Laval had been demanding a Japanese occupation so that any move made by the English or the de Gaullists might be forestalled. But there seemed no particular reason on that May night to expect a visit either from the British or the Japanese.

It was nearing three o'clock on the morning of May 5th when our sweepers began to pass through the approach channels, detonating the mines, apparently without in the least disturbing the sleepers ashore. And soon the landing-craft had cast loose from their parent ships and were making for the beaches. The navigation was hardly short of perfection. The assault ships and landing-craft picked their way through these difficult waters and brought the troops to shore

punctually: almost to the minute. Admiral Syfret subsequently wrote in his report of this stage of the operation:

'The skill, coolness and accuracy with which these ships and 'craft were brought safely through a most difficult channel 'bristling with mines is above all praise and is a shining example 'of devotion to duty.'

A few minutes after 4.30 a.m. No. 5 Commando and the attached company of East Lancashire began to land at the three beaches called Red on the north shore of Courrier Bay. Our men climbed up to the Windsor Castle battery and calmly took possession of it. From the huts in rear of the guns rushed a number of native Malgache troops, but these made no resistance. Another troop of the commando pushed straight inland and, after killing two French officers who resisted gallantly, reached some barracks where six Europeans and ninety natives—most of them disturbed from sleep—were made prisoner. The observation post at Windsor Castle defied capture. It was about 1,200 feet high and culminated in a cliff face with steps cut in the surface of the rock: the defenders were able to hold out until after a naval bombardment next day.

The two troops which landed at Red Beach South without opposition spent some time searching for their first objective—the coastal battery which did not, in fact, exist—and then made for the commando rendezvous which was two miles inland on a track called Col du Courrier.

Here the main body, with two Bren carriers, assembled, and at 9 a.m. began the advance eastward to the Andrakaka isthmus. A defensive position, with two field guns, was found deserted, and the commando pressed on to the village of Diego Suarez, collecting more prisoners on the way. Many of the Malgache troops were inclined to submit after firing a few rounds, and after a feeble fusillade Diego Suarez surrendered to the carriers before the main body marched in. All that remained to do was to take possession of a battery on the coast to the north, which proved to be quite a peaceful transaction. In all twenty-three Europeans and about 200 of the Malgache soldiery had been gathered in.

So, by 4.30 p.m. No. 5 Commando had accomplished its task at the cost of very little bloodshed. A search for boats was made, for Diego Suarez was separated from Antsirane by barely a mile of water. Unfortunately no boats were to be found. If the commando could have crossed the strait and obtained a footing in the naval base an early surrender might, perhaps, have followed.

While the men of the commando were landing in Courrier Bay



the 29th Independent Brigade was coming ashore nearer the village of Ambararata. At White Beach the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers experienced no trouble whatever, and one company was soon moved across in the direction of Basse Point, where the landing of the East Lancashire at Blue Beach was reported to be opposed. As Blue Beach was reckoned to be the only one at which vehicles could be landed there was no time to waste in securing it; but the delay was trifling, for some fifty Senegalese who opened fire at the landing-craft as they approached the shore soon fled in disorder. Our men burnt the huts near by. At Green Beach—described by the troops as a narrow passage through mangrove swamps—the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers came peacefully to land very near Ambararata village and followed the Welch Fusiliers who were pressing forward to Mangoky.

So, within two hours of the first touch down, we had 2,000 men ashore, and all the beaches and the exits therefrom were reported to be secure. Truly, a promising start to Operation Ironclad.

When the landings had been in progress for half an hour the carrier-borne aircraft began to play their part. Eighteen Swordfish from the *Illustrious* attacked the shipping in Diego Suarez harbour with torpedoes, bombs and depth charges: one submarine was sunk, and hits were obtained on some of the other ships. The sloop *D'Entrecasteux*, which was set on fire and ran ashore in Andohazampo Cove as a result of this attack, opened fire next day upon No. 5 Commando. She was again attacked by Fleet Air Arm fighters and again set on fire: finally this gallant Vichy vessel was finished off by the guns of H.M. destroyer *Laforey*.

The airfield, nearly six miles south of Antsirane, was effectively bombed by six Albacores from the *Indomitable*, and the hangars, which contained many aircraft, were left burning. An attack with incendiary bullets by eight Sea-Hurricanes followed. As the result of these raids French aircraft were never able to intervene with any effect.

Meanwhile H.M. cruiser *Hermione* was carrying out the diversion planned to attract the attention of the defenders to the east coast. She used delay-action smoke floats, and rockets and star shell which burst over the beach at the head of Ambodi Vahibe Bay. The cruiser then patrolled the entrance to Diego Suarez harbour, engaging in a short duel with a coast battery on the headland of Orangea. And as the light strengthened watchers had seen parachutists descending into the broad valley inland from Ambodi Vahibe Bay. It was a well selected spot, for a landing here would give

access both to the airfield and to Antsirane; accordingly the first of the French reserves was despatched in this direction. Thus the dummies had done their task and gained us valuable time. The hoax was, indeed, so elaborately sustained that, at home, one well-known military commentator recorded on the following day that 'reports reaching this country show that our parachutists have given an excellent account of themselves'.

But stiff fighting lay ahead. In reply to our conciliatory leaflets, which had been showered from the air, the military commander of Diego Suarez had broadcast a statement soon after 7 a.m. that he proposed to defend his position to the last; and in the course of the morning M. Annet, the Governor-General of Madagascar, repeated and confirmed his defiance. This occasioned no surprise, for, remembering our experience in Syria, some resistance was to be expected. It was clearly important to hasten the advance of the assault brigade along the road to Antsirane.

The Welch Fusiliers were the first to move forward from Mangoky, the Scots Fusiliers following. A Bren carrier and motor-cycle platoon led the way. Later, more carriers overtook the column and jolted their way to the front.

No opposition was encountered and no French seen until about 9.30 a.m. when an officer and three sailors were captured in the salt-pan area west of the village of Anamakia. Instructions had been issued that the first officer prisoner was to be sent off to the Governor of Antsirane with a copy of Admiral Syfret's letter demanding the surrender of the town and port. This was done, the Frenchman driving back to Antsirane in his own car, well in advance of our troops.

The sending of this message was afterwards acknowledged to be a grave error. An immediate surrender was hardly to be expected, and by thus revealing the direction of our advance we greatly diminished the value of the demonstrations on the eastern coast. Forewarned, the French soon made their dispositions to resist attack from the west.

When the proposal for an attack upon Diego Suarez had first been considered General Sturges had asked that air photographs be supplied, even at the risk of sacrificing the chances of surprise, to show the ground over which our advance would be made. This was done. The photographs revealed no prepared defences along the chosen route; but, unfortunately, the series did not extend far enough. They stopped short of the defences of the port, omitting to show a forward line and, further on, the two redoubts, Fort



Caimans and Fort Bellevue, solidly constructed with gun emplacements well concealed, and connected by a continuous line of trenches covering the high, flat and relatively open ground between. On either flank of these defences the scrub-covered slopes fell steeply down to the mangrove swamps that fringed the shore.

In the grilling tropical heat the 29th Brigade continued to push along the single road, thick with red dust, that led to Antsirane. It was a tedious and exhausting march: longer than had been anticipated, for the maps supplied to the brigade were inaccurate.

The leading carriers of the Welch Fusiliers first came under fire at about 11.0 a.m. from a position which, from our point of view was somewhat inaptly called the Col de Bonne Nouvelle. This ridge bestrides the road at the point where it turns northward, and our column was confronted by a trench system with well-camouflaged earth and concrete pill-boxes on a forward slope. Brigadier Festing, who was now up with the leading troops, decided to try a turning movement round the enemy's left flank, and sent all available carriers to ferry up more infantry.

While these preparations were in progress two Valentine tanks and one light tank arrived at Anamakia and were at once ordered up to attack. Soon the tanks reported that their fire had silenced the machine-gun posts on the ridge; actually the rocky nature of the ground had prevented the close approach of the Valentines and the French machine-gunners were lying doggo until the tanks had passed through the position and continued their advance along the road. Fire then opened upon our infantry, but the two companies of the Welch Fusiliers were put in for a flank attack and soon after two o'clock four more Valentines arrived to take part. By 3 p.m., after a show of fixed bayonets, the ridge was won.

The two leading Valentines, followed now by three light tanks, had already approached the main defences of Antsirane. They shot up a troop-laden lorry on the road but then came under the heavy and accurate fire of field guns using solid shot. The effect was disastrous. The leading Valentine was hit repeatedly and had to be abandoned: the other soon suffered a like fate. The light tanks, the Tetrarchs, with great but useless gallantry advanced to engage the enemy in their turn but two were hit and caught fire and the third was then ordered to withdraw. The survivors of the tank crews, with a Tommy gun, a Bren gun, and their pistols fought a dismounted action and twice drove back an enemy advance. A third attempt, made when our men were coming to the end of their ammunition, succeeded, and the party, of whom only three were unwounded, were

captured. It must be recorded that the French treated their prisoners 'with very great consideration'.

After the capture of the Col de Bonne Nouvelle the remaining tanks were sent forward to locate the field guns which had wrought such havoc. Far from succeeding, two of the Valentines were knocked out, and the detachment withdrew in the fading light about 6 p.m. Only one Valentine and three Tetrarchs remained fit for action.

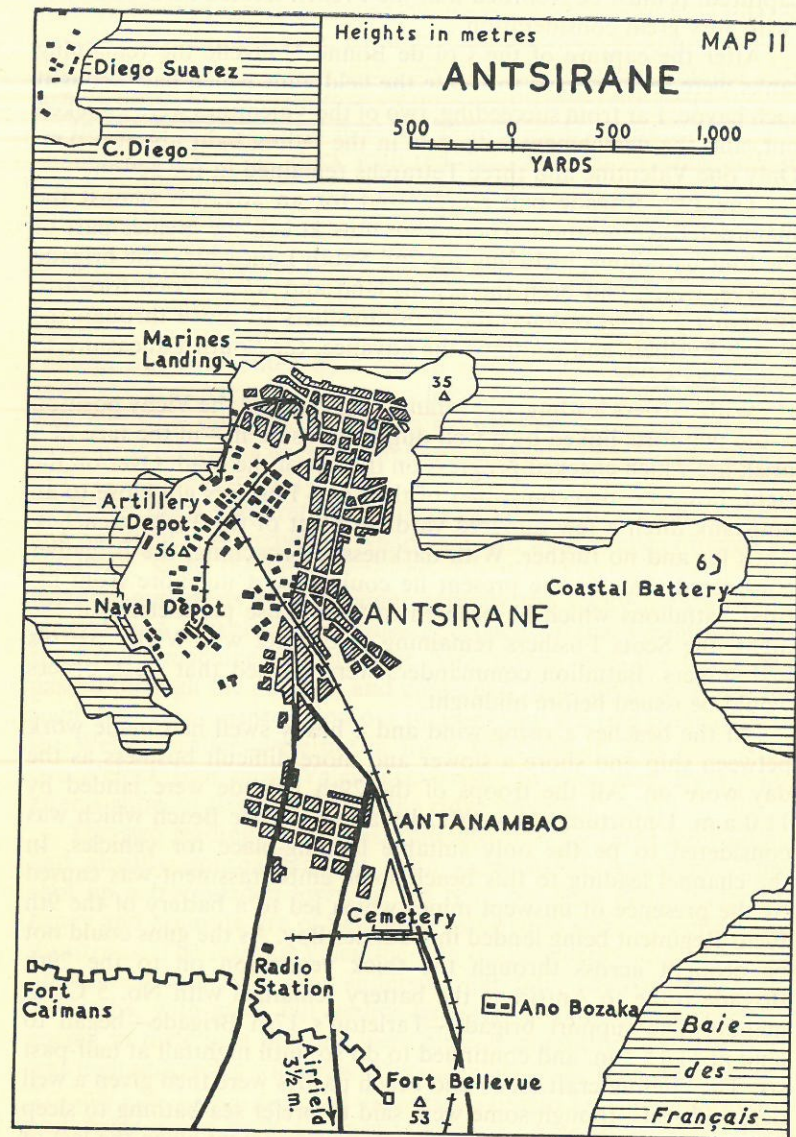
The 29th Brigade had reorganized for an advance against the main defensive position. There were now at call the greater part of the four battalions, including the 2nd South Lancashire, the brigade reserve, which had been the last to land and was hurried forward. Brigadier Festing ordered the Scots Fusiliers to move through the Welch Fusiliers and continue the advance, the South Lancashire to follow the Scots.

With carriers leading, our infantry approached the Vichy position—the two forts linked by a well-dug trench system—in the face of a brisk fire which checked progress on the left of the road. Over on the right, however, two companies of the Scots Fusiliers got close to an anti-tank ditch a few hundred yards in front of the Vichy trenches. Thus far and no further. With darkness approaching, the Brigadier considered that for the present he could expect no more from his tired battalions which he ordered to form close perimeters for the night, the Scots Fusiliers remaining in contact with Vichy patrols and snipers. Battalion commanders were warned that fresh orders would be issued before midnight.

At the beaches a rising wind and a heavy swell had made work between ship and shore a slower and more difficult business as the day wore on. All the troops of the 29th Brigade were landed by 11.0 a.m. Unfortunately a difficulty arose at Blue Beach which was considered to be the only suitable landing-place for vehicles. In the channel leading to this beach some embarrassment was caused by the presence of unswept mines which led to a battery of the 9th Field Regiment being landed in Courrier Bay. As the guns could not be brought across through the thick vegetation on to the 29th Brigade route to Antsirane the battery remained with No. 5 Commando. The support brigade—Tarleton's 17th Brigade—began to land at 11.15 a.m. and continued to do so until nightfall at half-past six. The landing-craft crews and beach parties were then given a well deserved rest—though some were said to prefer sea-bathing to sleep—until moon-rise, four hours later. It was midnight when the last of the 29th Brigade vehicles were brought ashore.

It can be claimed that in spite of obstacles and difficulties, which





were many, the landing of troops and equipment, stores and vehicles, had been well organized and well run. Progress on this first and most critical day was good. Only one small craft was lost and there was not a single air attack upon the ships at sea.

At 11.0 p.m. on May 5th Brigadier Festing issued his orders for a night attack. Three roads approached the Vichy position from the south, one of them skirting the bay on the eastern side of the peninsula: beyond this road it seemed possible to move over the broken and swampy ground near the shore to the rear of the defences. The intention was that the 2nd South Lancashire should work round in the moonlight and attack from this direction at dawn, which would be the signal for the Scots Fusiliers and East Lancashire to make a frontal assault supported by the guns of the 455th Light Battery. All available aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm were to bomb and machine-gun the defences for half an hour before the attacks went in.

The South Lancashire moved off at the appointed time. At half-past five when the air bombardment finished no reports had been received from the battalion, but the frontal assault was then made. On the right of the road the carriers of the East Lancashire advanced in determined fashion and only withdrew after five of them had succumbed to the rapid and accurate shooting of the French field guns. Everywhere our men were checked by the fire of the hostile artillery and machine guns, and by seven o'clock it was clear that the attack had failed. Later, General Sturges and Brigadier Tarleton, commanding the 17th Brigade, made a reconnaissance with Brigadier Festing, and the commanders then reviewed what appeared to be a critical situation. Nothing was known of the fortunes of the South Lancashire who might well have met with disaster or be in desperate straits; the frontal attack had made no real progress and the fate of the forward elements of the East Lancashire and Scots Fusiliers was unknown for they had not been able to send back reports over open ground still swept by fire. As yet we had no means of subduing the French artillery.

At two o'clock on the afternoon of May 6th General Sturges arrived back from the battle to confer with Admiral Syfret in the *Ramillies*. He was plainly worried. Clearly, for the moment, little more could be expected of the 29th Brigade which had made the first landing, marched many miles in the tropical heat and choking dust; and then, with little artillery support, delivered two attacks against a strongly defended position. A new plan must be made

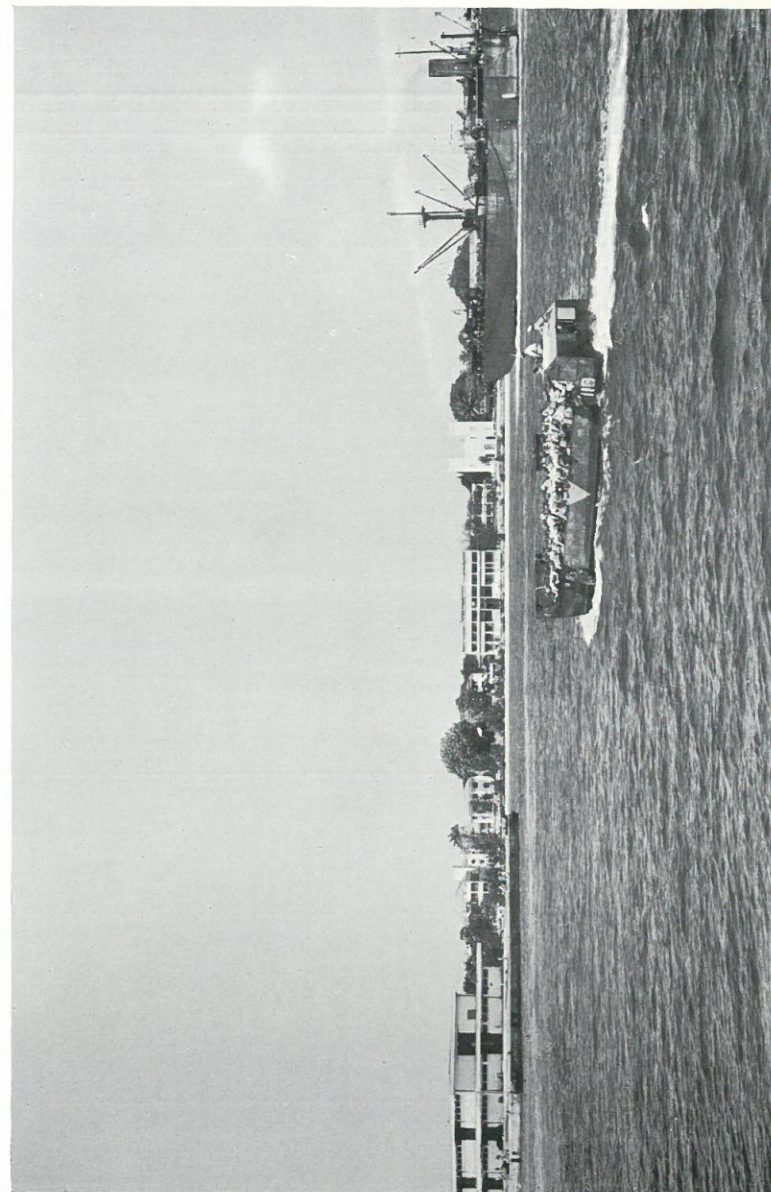


without delay, for our enterprise could only be justified by swift success. General Sturges decided to hasten the advance of the newly landed 17th Brigade from the beaches. He hoped to have it deployed by six o'clock that evening and to throw it into the attack immediately, making use this time of the period of darkness before moon-rise. Meanwhile our aircraft would continue to attack enemy troops, depôts and shipping, and our guns, as they progressively arrived from the beaches, would engage in the vital counter-battery work.

The General had hoped that No. 5 Commando would have found some means of crossing from Diego Suarez to land at Antsirane in the enemy's rear. As the necessary boats were lacking and no help could be expected from this quarter, he now put forward the suggestion that a destroyer should be employed to run through the narrow Orangea strait and land a party at Antsirane. It seemed extremely probable that the destroyer would never return, since, even if she got through the strait successfully she was most unlikely to be able to run the gauntlet a second time on the way out; but in view of the threatened deadlock in front of Antsirane Sturges thought the risk would be justified. Admiral Syfret thereupon agreed to despatch the destroyer *Anthony* with a landing party of fifty Marines, but made no secret of the fact that he regarded the business as a kind of forlorn hope.

Actually the situation was by no means as bad as it appeared. At the very moment when Sturges reached the *Ramillies* the officer commanding the South Lancashire was making his way back with a small party to report in person the considerable success which his battalion had achieved.

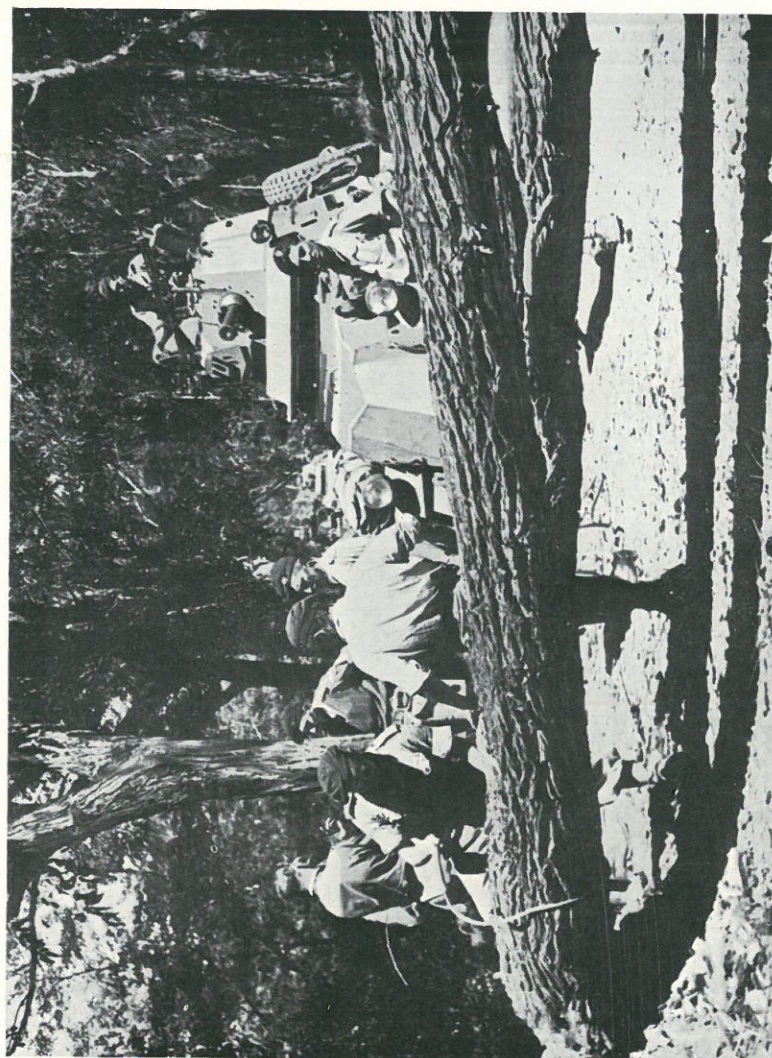
In their flanking movement the South Lancashire had passed a mile to the south of Fort Bellevue and continued eastward until they reached the shore. On the rocky hillside and lower down among the mangroves movement was difficult and it became almost impossible for companies, even platoons, to keep in touch. A few isolated enemy posts were rushed and, after turning northward, part of the battalion captured the barracks at the village of Ano Bozaka where thirty prisoners were taken. One company was divided into fighting patrols—guerrilla bands they called them—each acting independently and doing as much damage as possible. Near the road leading south to the airfield pack-horses and mules of the Vichy artillery were captured and then stampeded to add to the confusion behind the enemy's lines. Some of our men arrived within 200 yards of the Vichy front trenches and fired upon them from the rear. The



Imperial War Museum

TAMATAVE LANDING





SOUTH AFRICAN ARMoured CARS AT A ROAD-BLOCK  
Imperial War Museum

only mischance which befell was the dispersal or capture near the shore of a small escort which was bringing back about a hundred prisoners. One company, which passed through Ano Bozaka and reached the cemetery, cut telephone wires and intercepted vehicles carrying ammunition and supplies to the front. Soon after sunrise this company was in possession of the radio station which they held against counter-attacks all day. In the afternoon small parties of Malgache troops were seen in retreat to Antsirane. At dusk the company experienced no difficulty in withdrawing by the way it had come, for the French appeared to be in considerable confusion. The remainder of the battalion was engaged during the day south-east of Fort Bellevue in the vicinity of a reservoir, which was held by one company until the fighting ended. Over 200 prisoners were sent back. One subaltern took his patrol so near to Fort Bellevue that he was able to stand up and demand its surrender. This induced a special burst of fire.

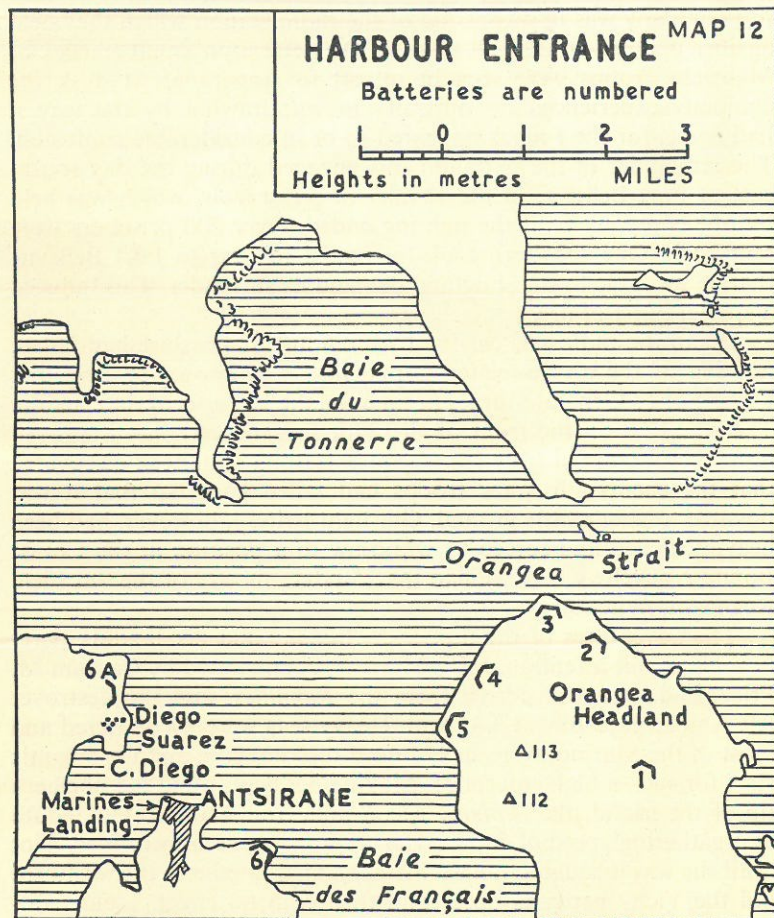
As all the radio sets carried by the South Lancashire had failed, nothing of the above-related happenings was known to Brigadier Festing or to General Sturges in time to take any appropriate action. The situation on the front of the 29th Brigade certainly improved towards the close of May 6th when the leading battalions discovered that the enemy's forward troops had fallen back, so that it was possible to gain a little ground. Our light battery, however, had been heavily shelled and forced to withdraw to a position at the Col de Bonne Nouvelle where we had ten 25-pdrs., mostly of the 9th Field Regiment, in action.

The adventures of the destroyer *Anthony* and her landing party now claim our attention. Fifty Marines, commanded by Captain M. Price, had been transferred from the *Ramillies*, and the destroyer left Ambararata Bay at 3.45 p.m. Heavy seas were encountered and most of the Marines were sick, a most discouraging and unromantic start for such a high enterprise. Making her way round the northern tip of the island, the *Anthony* was a mile from the harbour mouth and gathering speed at 8 p.m. Her approach was unperceived. Not until she was through Orangea Strait and half a mile to the westward did the Vichy batteries open, and then with no effect. Lieutenant-Commander Hodges backed his destroyer into the jetty at Antsirane at about half-past eight. The Marines scrambled ashore. In the harbour shells from the Vichy batteries were bursting, it seemed, at random. Ragged fire came from the jetty itself as well as from the wooded hills that rise behind Antsirane as the destroyer, her task done, raced out at high speed through the strait. Once again she



passed unscathed and, as she did so, replied defiantly with all her guns to the thunder of the Vichy heavy ordnance.

Meanwhile the fifty Marines had begun to grope their way forward through the dockyard towards the town. Their orders were to



attack every military or naval post they came across, with the exception of the barracks and the magazine which were believed to be too strongly held. They had nothing but their personal arms and their own stout hearts to depend on: ahead of them were, perhaps, 3,000 hostile troops; behind them the waters of the harbour. They

missed the turning which led directly into the town and continued south, keeping close to the waterside, with a high unscaleable wall on their left. Finding a gap in it Captain Price led his men through, and over a high bank which, in the darkness, gave the impression of being 'almost a cliff'. Thus they arrived at the house of the Artillery Commandant and took possession. Half the force under the command of Lieutenant H. J. Powell was then sent on down the road to the south, and this party reached and seized the Naval Depot before the occupants were well aware of what had happened. To one feeble fusillade the Marines replied with hand-grenades and then the Commandant made his surrender. There was an ugly moment when his bugler sounded a rousing blast. Something like a Rugby scrum ensued when a pack of infuriated Marines leapt upon the wretched man and, in the words of the official report, 'overwhelmed him' before it could be explained that he had, in all good faith, sounded the 'Cease Fire' and not the 'Alarm'!

And now nearly the whole town was in the hands of the Marines. Masses of men came streaming into the naval and military barracks to surrender and the great difficulty was how to dispose of them. More gratifying it was to set free three British officers and fifty other ranks, three pilots of the Fleet Air Arm, and a British agent who was due for execution that very morning. At the artillery barracks between 2,000 and 3,000 rifles and a number of heavy machine guns were among the spoils.

The *Anthony* was given a special reception by the fleet in recognition of her exploit. Admiral Syfret describes the whole affair as 'a fine achievement brilliantly carried out, and in my opinion the 'principal and direct cause of the enemy's collapse'.

While the Marines were landing on the jetty the 17th Brigade developed its frontal attack against the Bellevue-Caimans line, three or four miles to the south. On the right were the 2nd Northamptonshire, on the left the 6th Seaforth Highlanders with one company of the Welch Fusiliers. Two hours of darkness had been sacrificed so that the assault might coincide with the landing of the Marines, but no advantage was lost thereby. The two battalions went clean through the trench line midway between the forts, passing within two hundred yards of the strongpoints covering the road without being aware of their existence. That they were able to do so showed that the end was near. Then the success signal was seen from the town—the Marines were in possession—and Brigadier Tarleton brought up his third battalion, the 2nd Royal Scots Fusiliers, to assist in pressing home his advance. The last stages of the progress



into Antsirane by way of the native quarter of Antanambao presented no difficulty and the whole town was firmly in our possession by 3 a.m. on May 7th. Colonel Claerbout, commanding the military garrison of Diego Suarez, and Captain de V. Maerten, the French naval commander in Madagascar, surrendered to Brigadier Festing, whose brigade had passed through to lead the way in.

Near the forts, which had not yet formally capitulated, some not very effective sniping by Senegalese riflemen took a little time to subdue, and Fort Bellevue was still firing at intervals. But the most important task which remained was to induce the surrender of the coastal batteries and garrison of the Orangea headland. Until this was done we could make no use of the harbour. Lieutenant-Colonel H. C. Stockwell, commanding the Welch Fusiliers, and another officer had already been approached by the French and conducted to Orangea to discuss terms of surrender. In a message to the Vichy Government despatched on the previous evening, M. Annet, Governor-General of Madagascar, had described the situation in the Diego Suarez area as 'critical', and our occupation of Antsirane had gone a long way towards settling the issue. If necessary, General Sturges intended that the 17th Brigade should attack against Orangea from the landward side, and the Fleet and the Fleet Air Arm were due to begin a bombardment of the batteries at 10 a.m. As negotiations were still proceeding, however, the bombardment was postponed for half an hour; and when it appeared likely that agreement would be reached, Sturges suggested to the Admiral that action should be again postponed or even countermanded. But the Admiral was naturally reluctant to keep his ships 'steaming up and down in dangerous waters' and, as no message had come through from the British officers by 10.30 a.m., he ordered a fifteen-minute bombardment 'to encourage the enemy to surrender'. The *Ramillies* and the destroyer *Lightning* thereupon opened fire and were presently joined by the cruiser *Hermione*. This had the desired effect. After a few rounds had been expended a white flag was seen on Orangea and the garrison bugles sounded the 'Cease Fire'.

The surrender of Orangea occurred at 10.50 a.m. on May 7th, and, although it was not until 2 p.m. that the formal surrender of Fort Caimans and Fort Bellevue was arranged, the naval bombardment may be said to have brought about the final accomplishment of our purpose. It had been a very necessary though by no means an agreeable purpose, for we found no satisfaction, here or elsewhere, in destroying the ships and aircraft of our former ally and in inflicting loss upon her troops.

In all, the affair had lasted less than three days, and it cannot be said that control over the most important harbour in Madagascar had cost us very dear. The Royal Navy had ensured the safe and swift arrival of the landing-craft at the selected beaches—no easy task as we have seen. The initial attacks of the Fleet Air Arm upon the shipping in Diego Suarez harbour and on the airfield south of Antsirane had allowed the landing and the forward movement of our troops to be accomplished without hostile naval action or interference from the air. The exploit of the *Anthony* and of the landing party of Marines is typical of the way in which naval support was forthcoming whenever the need arose.

The total casualties suffered by our ground forces during the three-day campaign amounted to 392. These were made up as follows:

	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Wounded</i>	<i>Missing</i>
Officers .	15	22	—
Other ranks .	90	261	4
	—	—	—
Total . .	105	283	4

The French stated that their losses were something over 150 killed and 500 wounded. Several hundred prisoners were taken in the course of the fighting, but these were speedily released, less than 200 of the wounded remaining in our field hospitals.

The losses suffered by our aircraft amounted to five Swordfish, two Fulmars, one Martlet and one Albacore, but only four of these from enemy action. So far as could be ascertained the number of Vichy fighters and bombers destroyed either in the air or on the ground amounted to more than twenty.

At sea we lost one mine-sweeper. Vichy lost two submarines, an armed merchant cruiser and a sloop, and a number of other vessels were damaged.



## CHAPTER II

# THE LONG ROAD

### Majunga

THE occupation of the whole Diego Suarez area began without delay. Four minesweepers, held in readiness for the occasion, did their work and at 5 p.m. on May 7th the battleship *Ramillies*, followed by other warships, entered the harbour. General Sturges now had his whole force ashore, for the 13th Brigade had landed. It was ordered to occupy the airfield and to take up defensive positions covering the approaches to Diego Suarez from the south. The civilian inhabitants—French, Malgache, Arabs, Africans, Chinese, a great variety of races—soon settled down under the new régime and, as the area of occupation was dependent for much of its food upon the country further south, we were obliged to extend our sphere of influence. This was done with very little trouble. By the end of June we were in possession of Beramanja, some eighty miles south of Antsirane as the crow flies.

As we have seen, the advisability of securing the ports of Majunga and Tamatave had already been considered, but the actual operations had never been sanctioned. On May 17th they were definitely cancelled by orders from Home. Burma had been lost, India might be invaded as soon as the monsoon was over, our fortunes were at a low ebb in the Western Desert. Obligated to conserve our strength for the defence of Egypt, India and Australia, we could not afford to proceed with any divergent operations however desirable they might be.

From Madagascar the troops belonging to the 5th Division were to be sent on to India without further delay, and the convoy carrying the 13th Brigade sailed on May 20th when the first cases of malaria and dengue fever developed. Many were sick and, after arrival in India, all officers and men who had been on shore in Madagascar underwent a special anti-malarial routine treatment which took precedence of all duties and training.

On May 25th Lieutenant-General Sir William Platt, commanding in East Africa, was informed that Madagascar would become his responsibility. Although this was not to happen until July 1st General Platt was soon obliged to occupy himself with the Madagascar problem. To begin with he had to find a brigade from East Africa to relieve the 17th Brigade due to rejoin and complete the 5th Division in India; so it was that the 22nd (East African) Brigade, consisting of three battalions of King's African Rifles and commanded by Brigadier W. A. Dimoline was sent to Diego Suarez, enabling the 17th Brigade to leave for India on June 12th.

In the Mozambique Channel our convoys had been suffering some loss, and sinkings were to increase during the next few months. At the end of May had come a special reminder of the reality of the Japanese menace: a midget submarine entered Diego Suarez harbour on the evening of the 30th, sank a tanker by torpedo attack, and torpedoed the battleship *Ramillies* which was damaged severely. There is, perhaps, some satisfaction in recording that a few days later in the country north of Diego Suarez a commando patrol rounded up and killed two Japanese. Papers found on these men showed that they were the crew of a midget submarine and mentioned the torpedoing of our ships.

In our endeavour to complete the work which we had begun in May, we made every effort to come to terms with M. Annet, Governor-General of Madagascar. We had, of course, no desire to interfere unduly with French administration, but our whole purpose was to exercise military control of the island and this M. Annet, in his unswerving adherence to the Vichy Government, would not concede. It was obvious that in negotiating he played for time, hoping to stay our hand until the rains came in October.

General Platt visited South Africa in June to secure the co-operation of the Union Government. The offer of a brigade group had already been made by General Smuts and gratefully accepted by the British Cabinet, but the South Africans were disappointed to learn that, owing to a general shortage of transport, their brigade could not be employed in the main operations. General Platt hoped that the Union might be able to provide bridging equipment, signal units, and other services; but with the best will in the world only part of these requirements could be met.

The South African contingent consisted of Brigadier G. T. Senescall's 7th Brigade (First City Regiment, The Pretoria Regiment, and the Pretoria Highlanders), with the 6th Field Regiment, 88th Field Company and A Squadron 1st Armoured Car Commando



attached. It reached Diego Suarez on June 24th.<sup>1</sup> The fact that The Pretoria Regiment is the South African regiment allied to the Royal Welch Fusiliers was made the occasion of a pleasing ceremony three days later when the drums of the Fusiliers played their South African comrades through the streets of Antsirane.

The 7th South African Brigade occupied a portion of the defences and the troops soon made themselves at home. This was a rather dull period for all concerned, occupied by training and by internal security and coast defence duties. At the beginning of July a detachment of King's African Rifles peacefully occupied the island of Mayotte,<sup>2</sup> midway between Madagascar and the mainland, a convenient air station thus passing into our possession.

Then on August 11th, by which time the situation on the eastern frontiers of India was adjudged to be more stable and that in the Western Desert had taken a decided turn for the better, authority was received from home to proceed with the occupation of Madagascar. Admiral Sir J. F. Somerville, Commander-in-Chief Eastern Fleet, and Lieutenant-General Platt were jointly charged with the direction of operations, the actual commanders of the naval and military forces engaged being Rear-Admiral W. G. Tennant and Major-General R. G. Sturges.

It was difficult to foresee what resistance might be offered to an operation which aimed at military control of the whole island which is nearly four times larger than England and Wales. How soon would M. Annet bow to the inevitable? Tananarive, the capital, would be our chief goal while, at the same time, we secured the regional centres of government. Movement must be swift, that is by the roads, for vehicles could not negotiate swamp, mountain and jungle country. Much depended upon our ability to bring to action the Vichy land forces—we held command of the sea and the air—and to induce them to surrender. Time, let it be repeated, was all-important, for the rains which come in late October would increase our movement difficulties and subject the affair to interminable delay.

Diego Suarez, at the northern tip of the island, was too far away, and offered no convenient routes southward for the passage of any but small bodies of troops. So the long-deferred plan for landings

<sup>1</sup> The first South African arrival in Madagascar was No. 20 (later No. 16) Squadron S.A.A.F. which had flown in to the Antsirane airfield on May 13th. Colonel S. A. Melville, S. African Air Force, who had been on Admiral Syfret's staff, now commanded our air forces which included a squadron of the Fleet Air Arm, an R.A.F. flight and the S.A. squadron.

<sup>2</sup> Map 13.

at Majunga and Tamatave came into operation. Majunga was connected by a main road to Tananarive; Tamatave, the principal port, was linked to the capital by a road and also by one of the few railways in the island.

The 29th Independent Brigade, the specialists in this kind of operation, was to make the surprise landing at Majunga under cover of the dark. This was called 'Operation Stream'. A detachment from the East African Brigade with some South African armoured cars would land with the 29th Brigade and push inland at once to secure two important bridges of which more will be heard later. The East African Brigade and the armoured car squadron would then advance with all speed upon the capital, Tananarive. This, the second stage, was known as 'Line'. Meanwhile the 29th Brigade was to be re-embarked and conveyed to the east coast for the landing at Tamatave, known as 'Jane'. The two forces were intended to join hands on the Tamatave-Brickaville-Tananarive road, thus establishing communication across the centre of the island.

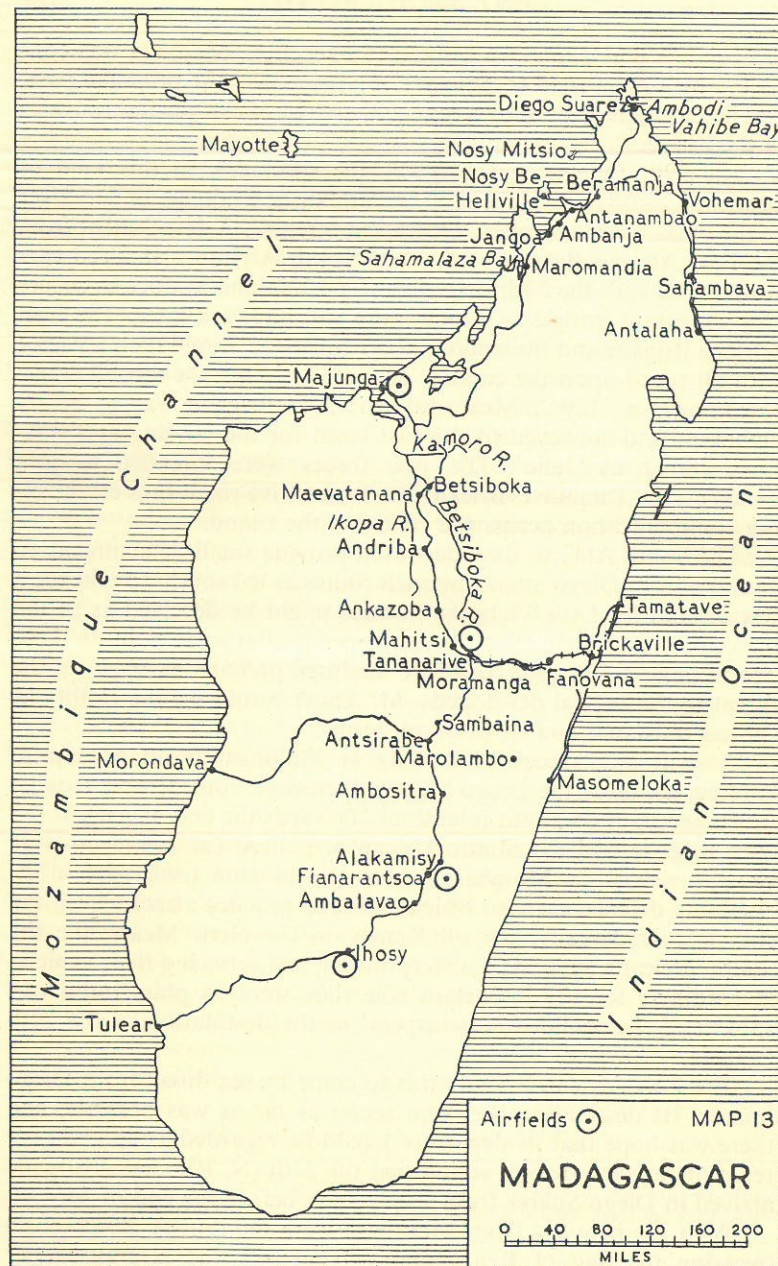
The South African Brigade would provide small detachments to advance from Diego Suarez by such routes as led south, so that for a few days at least the Vichy authorities might be deceived as to the direction of our main effort. It was hoped that at some point in these operations—if not after the first landings perhaps as soon as the threat to the capital developed—M. Annet would see the futility of further resistance and agree to our terms.

A swift and successful landing at Majunga meant a surprise landing, so, as in the Diego Suarez operation, considerable trouble was taken to conceal our intentions. Towards the end of August the 29th Brigade and the South African armoured car squadron were brought across to Mombasa where the brigade took part in an elaborate defence exercise which included practice attacks from the sea and, incidentally, put all Kenya on the alert. Meanwhile the South Africans were busy waterproofing and servicing their vehicles in readiness for the important rôle they were to play. India was spoken of 'in confidential whispers' as the destination of the 29th Brigade.

The East African Brigade was to come by sea direct from Diego Suarez. Its destination was kept secret as far as was possible, and there was hope that its departure would be regarded as an ordinary relief of garrison troops, seeing that the 27th (N. Rhodesia) Brigade arrived in Diego Suarez from East Africa before the end of August.

With the convoys from Mombasa were the cruiser *Birmingham* (wearing the flag of Rear-Admiral Tennant), the aircraft carrier





*Illustrious*, the usual destroyer escort, and the Dutch cruiser *Heemskerck*. These convoys met the ships carrying the 22nd (East African) Brigade from Diego Suarez at noon on September 9th, the rendezvous being in the Mozambique Channel. A course was then set for Majunga. Shortly before midnight the leading ships dropped anchor and each vessel of the convoys began to move into her appointed place. The moon had not yet risen. No alarm had been given. As at Diego Suarez the Royal Navy had brought the troops in safety and certainty, and without delay, to the points at which they were to land.

If the actual process of landing proved a rather harassing business no blame attaches to the naval and military staffs, the troops, the crews or the beach parties. After the May operation transports and landing-craft had been dispersed, for all were sorely needed elsewhere. To reassemble them and their like had been no easy matter.

In his despatch General Platt explains that

'the landing-craft had only arrived at Mombasa in August from India where they had been used for training purposes. There was no time to give them the complete overhaul they badly needed. There were neither spare craft nor spare parts. Some had to be cannibalized. . . . It had not been possible to make a repair ship available.'

The port, and attractive little town, of Majunga is on the western coast, about 320 miles from the northern tip of Madagascar. It faces south inside the harbour formed by the estuary of the Betsiboka, Madagascar's largest river. The first landing, however, took place at 'Red Beach', some eight miles away, so that part of the 29th Brigade could close in upon Majunga from the north.

It was about one o'clock on the morning of September 10th that the 2nd East Lancashire and the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers went ashore at Red Beach to find themselves confronted by fairly steep cliffs, and a scrub-covered countryside not easy to negotiate; and soft sand underfoot is no help to speedy movement. The two battalions were to strike inland until they reached the roadway leading southward past the airfield to Majunga.

After a toilsome passage the East Lancashire reached this roadway about 4 a.m. and thereafter made steady if slow progress. Some shots were fired and some Vichy troops seen but our men encountered little resistance worth the name. At twenty past five, when it was growing light, came a reminder that the Fleet Air Arm was with them. As one company commander put it: 'The air was full of Swordfish and Martlets. We hastily put up our red umbrellas.' Red umbrellas were the recognition signal to friendly aircraft; and it



may be mentioned that as a distinguishing mark for the benefit of friendly troops yellow celanese was worn round the neck.

By this time a landing had been made at Majunga itself. The 2nd South Lancashire was greeted by a splutter of machine-gun bullets as the battalion began to reach the shore, but few men were hit and the destroyer *Blackmore*, standing by, had no need to open fire. The docks area was soon cleared, and a rapid advance into the town found most of the inhabitants and a goodly part of the small garrison sound asleep.

On the northern side the East Lancashire had captured the airfield and now confronted a hastily-manned Vichy position on the outskirts of the town. The Welch Fusiliers had cleared the country near the coast, but sent two companies to make a wide sweep inland and come in from the north-east.

In the town the South Lancashire reached the artillery barracks where they encountered Commandant Martin, commanding the garrison, and secured his surrender; but it was not easy to convey orders to the scattered parties of Vichy troops who were still sniping at their visitors. Eventually two cars, each containing a British and a French officer and showing a white flag, toured the streets and stopped the shooting as and when they came upon it.

This took time, but at 7.40 a.m., when the East Lancashire and the Fusiliers were about to attack the Vichy position north of the town, news of the 'Cease Fire' arrived. All was over, fortunately at little cost to either side.

A landing was made on the southern shore of the harbour to search for a suspected but non-existent coastal battery. Here a few Malgache troops were gathered in. Perhaps the worst experience was that of men of No. 5 Commando who had orders to reach a bridge thirty miles up-stream and there block the road leading northward to Maromandia, objective, as we shall see, of a South African column. The boats of the commando got into trouble with sandbanks and swift currents, and the last part of the journey was made on foot through swamps; but the road was blocked although it took nearly all day to reach it.

The task of the 29th Brigade was done. Brigadier Festing, who landed at 8.40 a.m., had already agreed that no more troops and no more vehicles of the brigade should be brought ashore. All landing-craft were given to the East African Brigade which was to press forward with the utmost speed to the capital, Tananarive. The troops of the 29th Brigade were withdrawn to their transports in the ships' boats and by the morning of September 13th all were on ship-

board again. Their last word on Majunga is with our East Lancashire officer who afterwards recorded: 'Of the boiling sun and the repeated dive-bombing attacks of the mosquitoes I shall say nothing. The subject is still too painful.'

So the 22nd East African Brigade began to take over Majunga on the actual morning of the landing, September 10th; but the first and most pressing business was to start a small column on the main road—the only road—to Tananarive. General Platt had laid it down as a matter of prime necessity that the two important bridges of Kamoro and Betsiboka—respectively ninety-nine and 131 miles, as the road winds, from Majunga—should be secured intact. If the Vichy forces were to demolish these bridges our lack of the engineer equipment needed to repair or replace them would probably hold up our advance for weeks. We must, then, arrive upon the scene before our presence was suspected.

Three troops of South African armoured cars, with a platoon of *askaris* and an engineer detachment in trucks, were to make the dash to the bridges, but the start was delayed by several vexatious happenings which might have been avoided. The East Africans were ashore by 5 a.m., but the South Africans were in a transport which anchored very far offshore, and their armoured cars were in another vessel. It was not until 10.40 a.m. that the column left the beach and then only to be held up by an expanse of scrub and deep soft sand which the vehicles could not negotiate under their own power. Fortunately it proved possible to land a bulldozer which pulled the cars and trucks through to firmer ground, and the dash inland began at noon.

Making good speed, encountering neither obstruction nor ambush, the column at 4 p.m. reached Kamoro bridge which was not even prepared for demolition. There was an exchange of shots in which an unfortunate Malgache sentry was killed, and then, the bridge secured, a halt was called to enable the remainder of the troops to catch up. The rest of the armoured car squadron, followed by the leading battalion—1/1st (Nyasaland) King's African Rifles—of the East African Brigade came through at good speed, but the first road-blocks, consisting of loose stone walls, were soon encountered and progress became slow. At nightfall the column was still six miles short of the Betsiboka bridge, but nothing more could be done till morning.

The story of the South African operations in the north of the island, which started at the same time as the Majunga landing, will



be told in due course, and the 29th Brigade descent upon Tamatave comes later. But at this point it is convenient to relate what happened further down the west coast at Morondava on this and the following days. A troop of No. 5 Commando which had been transhipped at sea to H.M. Australian destroyer *Napier* during the passage from Mombasa, was landed from boats in broad daylight. The troop took peaceful possession of Morondava, and in the name of the local authority telephoned to Tananarive reporting the arrival of strong British forces. In reply a high official spoke in all innocence: no help could be given by the capital. Half the little party of invaders then advanced inland for over forty miles, spreading reports of the imminent arrival of overwhelming forces and bespeaking billets and supplies for them in the villages. Our men were re-embarked on the night of September 12th, having, it was hoped, created considerable alarm, despondency and doubt in Tananarive over 220 miles away.

### On to Tananarive

WE now return to our South African armoured cars and East African *askaris* who at daylight on September 11th resumed their advance to the Betsiboka bridge. They found that the cables holding the 500-foot span across the main channel had been cut and that the structure had collapsed.

Here was frustration and bitter disappointment. But a bold investigation, which drew fire, revealed the astonishing inefficiency—or lethargy—of the Vichy engineers. The span had fallen unbroken into the river and any car which was capable of managing a descent of thirty feet at an angle of forty-five degrees, splashing through three feet of water, and then climbing up to the further bank at the same angle, could make the crossing.

At 7.30 a.m. a French bomber passed overhead and, in an endeavour to complete the work of destruction, dropped a number of bombs. They fell very wide of the mark.

A platoon of King's African Rifles crossed the river under the covering fire of the armoured cars while rifles and machine guns opened from the scrub-covered hillside beyond. Soon the Senegalese defenders retreated with the loss of about fifty men including thirty-seven prisoners. The *askaris*, who had six wounded in this affair, impressed the South Africans by the dash and skill which they displayed; and throughout the following weeks co-operation between infantry and armoured cars was admirable. Our East African

warriors became devoted to the cars which they credited with the powerful and pugnacious qualities of the rhinoceros. They knew of no higher tribute. And if, as fighting men, they enjoyed the esteem of the South Africans, they were soon to strike terror into the hearts of the Malgache soldiery who knew them as 'Zulus'.

A full day's work made the bridge fit for battle traffic, but road-blocks, chiefly of boulders and logs, continued to slow down the advance. On the 13th the South Africans shot their way into the village of Maevatanana, from which the Vichy forces withdrew after expending a considerable amount of ammunition without effect.

The column, to which a battery of South African field-guns had been added—more artillery arrived later—pressed on, clearing the frequent obstructions which it was so rarely the Vichy policy to defend. Our men were committed to plain hard work with little rest in an uncongenial mosquito-ridden climate. Such skirmishes as did occur—sometimes brisk and exciting while they lasted—were only incidental to the toil and hardship on the way to Tananarive.

At one place the decking of a 100-foot bridge was found to have been torn out and flung into the river bed below. It had to be replaced. Once the cars took a side-track to a ferry over the Ikopa river and destroyed the barges they found there. Leaving the hot coastal plain the column wound its way into the mountains amid thick vegetation. And always there were road-blocks to clear. The South Africans, who took their share of this labour, had also to maintain wireless communication throughout the column and never failed.

On September 16th, nine miles south of Andriba and more than half-way to Tananarive, a river bridge was found to be demolished. In the defile on the near side stone walls and felled trees blocked the road. The *askaris* started to clear these obstacles, and two platoons waded the river to be received by fire from slit-trenches on the ridges beyond. The Nyasalanders then attacked with gusto and after fierce fighting at close quarters routed a company of Senegalese. A night's work on a deviation round the remains of the bridge made it possible to renew the advance next morning.

Two days later at Ankazoba another river bridge was found wrecked. There was an exchange of fire, but the first salvo of our artillery dispersed the defenders and all hands, assisted by the Malgache inhabitants, began to construct a ford with logs and stones. An armoured car which tried this crossing stuck in the river bed and was hauled out by two other cars: then a new ford was started, and



on the 20th the advance was resumed. Ankazoba will be remembered by the men who worked waist-deep in water for hours on end.

Progress was always slow, for many trees had been felled across the way. Boughs and branches had to be lopped before the cars could tow the trunks clear. Here, as elsewhere, the local Malgache, who had undoubtedly assisted to make the obstructions, cheerfully helped us to demolish them.

On the afternoon of September 21st came the discovery that the village of Mahitsi was defended. Vichy troops occupied a ridge, and the fire of their field guns stopped the work of removing the inevitable road-blocks. Brigadier Dimoline, commanding the East African Brigade, went into the attack without delay, counting upon the early moon-rise to help the operation. The first deployment of the *askaris* was covered by the machine guns of the cars which were under shell-fire for nearly an hour but escaped damage. Then the East African mortars came into action, followed by the leading 25-pdrs. as they arrived upon the scene. A company which attacked the Vichy left flank was confronted by a steep cliff and encountered a spirited resistance. The bush and long grass caught fire and hampered both sides, but eventually the attack was pushed home and soon after midnight the ridge was ours. Our opponents, however, were not yet subdued, and their gun positions remained intact.

Next day our augmented artillery silenced the French 'seventy-fives' and in the afternoon the East African advance, which threatened to turn both flanks, settled the business. Our losses were light—two killed and sixteen wounded—those of Vichy unknown, but forty-five prisoners, three field guns and a number of mortars and machine guns fell into our hands.

Still working through the road-blocks the column pressed forward until, on the morning of the 23rd, it came upon an elaborate system of defences some ten miles short of Tananarive. Actually the position was occupied by mixed troops which numbered less than 250 men, the Malgache element having no heart at all for the fight. Again we tried an enveloping movement and the affair was over in an hour and a half at the cost of one *askari* killed and four wounded.

While the South African armoured cars were still giving covering fire to the advancing infantry the *Chef de Région* arrived under a white flag. Tananarive had been declared an 'open city' and all that remained to be done was for Brigadier Dimoline and Brigadier M. S. Lush, one of General Platt's political officers, to go forward and arrange for our occupation. The column, headed by Major Vos,



Imperial War Museum

KING'S AFRICAN RIFLES IN TANANARIVE



who commanded the South African armoured car squadron, entered Tananarive in the afternoon amid the hearty greetings of the Malgache population and the approval of some, at least, of the resident French.

Tananarive, ancient capital of the Hova dynasty, is a picturesque terraced city on a hill which rises abruptly from the plain and is crowned by the old royal palace. At a lower level are wide streets containing attractive modern buildings, the shops and cafés helping to create an atmosphere which is typically French.

The civil administration changed gear smoothly on the whole, the French co-operating, though at first in somewhat frigid fashion. Our policy was to interfere as little as possible with the internal government of the country but, at least, the succession of severe sentences upon persons professing, or suspected of, sympathy with de Gaulle came to an end.

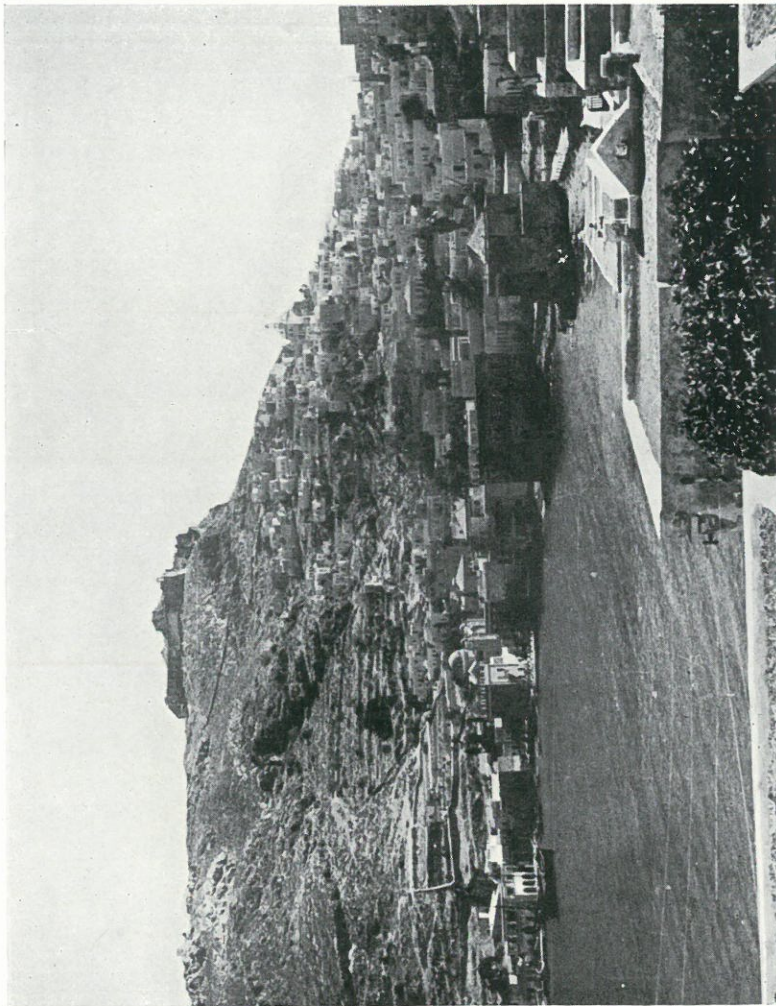
By this time, as will presently be seen, the 29th Brigade had occupied Tamatave and made progress towards the capital from the east coast, while in the north most of the centres of administration were in our hands. There seemed little point in further resistance but M. Annet, the Governor-General thought otherwise. As early as September 16th he had asked General Platt, whose headquarters were then established at Majunga, to receive envoys who would discuss terms on which the conflict could be brought to an honourable end. M. Annet's representatives were flown to Majunga next day by a South African aircraft; but they declared our terms to be unacceptable and were taken back to Tananarive. When obliged to vacate the capital M. Annet had departed for Fianarantsoa, further south, calling upon the troops which remained to him for a resolute resistance.

So it was that the South African armoured cars and the East African Brigade, which had already covered 360 miles from Majunga to Tananarive in fourteen days, could be given no respite. On September 25th they took the road leading south to Fianarantsoa. Presently we shall follow their advance which brought this singular campaign to an end.

### South Africans in the North

Now let us see what the South Africans were doing in the northern part of the island while their armoured car squadron was leading the East African Brigade along the road to Tananarive.

F.V.—14



LEROS TOWN AND CASTLE FROM ALINDA BAY  
Imperial War Museum



A landing on Nosy Be, an island some 200 miles up the coast from Majunga, was made by two platoons of the Pretoria Highlanders, with mortars and machine guns, conveyed from Diego Suarez by H.M. minelayer *Manxman*. Also of the party was a detachment of Royal Marines. At a quarter to three on the morning of September 9th the *Manxman* anchored off the picturesque little town of Hellville and proceeded to open a fifteen minutes' bombardment, the mortars and machine guns joining in, while the troops waited ready in their boats. The landing was practically unopposed although it is recorded that 'some unknown person threw a few grenades in the direction of one platoon'. By noon Hellville was settling down to normal life again, outlying detachments of Malgache troops had come in to surrender, and the local authorities had decided 'to play ball'.

From the 4th to the 9th September a company of the First City Regiment had trained in landing operations at the island called Nosy Mitsio, forty miles north-east of Nosy Be, having been transported thither in six dhows. These are not the handiest craft for such adventures but nothing better was to be had. The expedition put to sea on the afternoon of September 9th and after an uncomfortable passage down the coast made an uncomfortable landing within reach of Antanambao on the main road. Moving north this party met with the merest token resistance until, on September 11th, it made contact with a stronger South African column moving southward.

This southward advance, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel N. B. Gettcliffe, was made by a column consisting of the First City Regiment (less the company mentioned above), the 16th Field Battery, part of the 88th Field Company, and eight armoured cars of the Pretoria Highlanders. The column had started from Beramanja with Maromandia as its objective, but although Vichy resistance was negligible progress was not easy. The coast road, its soft sandy surface unfit for heavy vehicles and in constant need of repair by the sappers, ran through mangrove swamps of which some were tidal; many of the bridges had been destroyed or badly damaged and the small box-girder bridge of the 88th Field Company had to be used and taken up again time after time. North of Ambanja there was no sign of resistance except a little sniping which could be ignored. Not so the mosquitoes. In the words of Colonel Gettcliffe's report: 'They bite all day and at night come out by thousands. All men have been badly bitten, especially those working at night on deviations.' Ambanja was occupied on September 12th and, as the

Vichy forces continued to elude the advance, arrangements were made to trap them by landing in their rear.

This landing was made by part of the Nosy Be detachment which came eighty miles southward to Sahamalaza Bay and landed at the head of the creek on September 15th. After an exhausting march the detachment cut the main road south of Maromandia, and next day reached Maromandia. The troops were withdrawn to Nosy Be on the 17th, after news had been received of the surrender of all French troops in the area to the north. They had capitulated to Colonel Gettcliffe's column which had pressed on with all possible speed. South of Jangoa the country was hilly, thickly wooded, with many bridges and culverts damaged or destroyed in the usual Vichy fashion. On September 14th the French were at last encountered in a very strong well-organized position which promised to give considerable trouble. Even after the 16th Field Battery had shelled the defences there seemed no sign of weakening; but when the South African infantry began to deploy, the white flag was raised and twenty-three Frenchmen and over 100 natives were gathered in. After a parley the surrender of all troops in the Maromandia region was secured. Colonel Gettcliffe reached the village on the 18th; four days later his patrols made contact with a company of the 5th King's African Rifles which had come north from Majunga.

The east coast advance upon Vohemar and Antalaha was made by a very small column: one platoon and six armoured cars of The Pretoria Regiment with the usual engineer, signals and medical detachments. Leaving Beramanja on the night of September 9th the column made good time over a very bad road, and by the morning of the 11th were cutting telephone wires only twelve miles from Vohemar. The column drove on and took possession of the town during the siesta period. There was no resistance but the *Chef de Région* proved to be a recalcitrant individual and had to be placed under arrest. The march down the coast was resumed on the 16th, the few sappers, with infantry assistance, working night and day to repair damaged bridges and culverts, make deviations, and put pontoon ferries in working order again. This peaceful but toilsome progress continued to Sahambava, entered on the 20th, and Antalaha, occupied in the early morning of the 23rd. It can readily be understood that Vichy policemen resented being locked in their own cells, but on the whole the local authorities in Vohemar, Sahambava and Antalaha surrendered gracefully to the inevitable and were treated with due ceremony. South



African troops, who received their words of command in Afrikaans, saluted the Tricolour; and speeches were made in English, French and Malgache.

## Tamatave

It was an imposing armada which appeared off the east coast of Madagascar in readiness for the landing at Tamatave in the early morning of September 18th. The transports and landing-craft were escorted by three cruisers, a fair complement of destroyers and minesweepers, and an aircraft carrier, backed by H.M. battleship *Warspite*.

This was the operation called 'Jane', the code words which represented all three parts of our main enterprise composing the rather frivolous title 'Stream Line Jane'.

As the heavy surf on the beaches outside would have made a very hazardous business of the landings, it had been decided to enter Tamatave harbour in daylight and call upon the town to surrender. Refusal to do so would mean bombardment but our naval and military commanders hoped that this would prove unnecessary. The convoy entered the harbour at 5.40 a.m., and while H.M.S. *Birmingham* held radio conversation with the French the troops left their transports and packed into landing-craft.

The Vichy *Chef de Région* refused to parley without orders from Tananarive: eventually he refused to receive our envoys under any circumstances, but was told that we should send them, nevertheless; and that if their boat was fired on a bombardment would follow. At 7.30 a.m. a launch displaying a white flag left the *Birmingham*. As it neared the shore it was fired on and returned with all speed. Almost immediately our warships opened fire with their secondary armament—the voice of the *Warspite* was not heard—and three minutes later, at 7.54 a.m., Vichy displayed the white flag of surrender.

Before half-past eight the troops of the 29th Brigade were landing—some direct from destroyers which drew alongside the mole. Although our shells had killed a few Malgache soldiery and a number of civilians our men were received in something like friendship, a few of the more fortunate being regaled with hot coffee—even with eggs and bacon. When Brigadier Festing landed at ten o'clock the town was in our peaceful occupation and the *Chef de Région* in a more or less reasonable frame of mind. Few Vichy troops were to be seen,

for the garrison and most of the guns of the harbour defences had been withdrawn.

Soon the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers and the 2nd South Lancashire were advancing southward by road and railway, but the Fusiliers were confronted with the usual Vichy method of making things difficult. Along the first four miles of road were eight road-blocks formed of felled trees and tree stumps, some of these obstacles being sixty feet across. Before noon, however, an engine drawing eight trucks steamed slowly into Tamatave station: the railway, for some distance at least, appeared to be intact. Brigadier Festing promptly ordered the South Lancashire to take the train to Brickaville and capture the place.

Part of the battalion moved at 3 p.m., some sappers being of the party and also a railway official who was carried as an insurance against pre-arranged accident on the line. Starting well, this journey came to a stop short of Brickaville, for two railway bridges over a river on the near side of the town had been demolished. Our men had therefore to climb down into the river bed and make their way across on foot, so it was one o'clock on the morning of the 19th when Brickaville was occupied without loss, a platoon of Malgache being quite ready to surrender.

The rest of the story of the 29th Brigade's advance from Tamatave is one not of fighting but of engineering feats on road and railway, the infantry toiling mightily with Malgache assistance under the direction of the sappers of the 236th Field Company who tackled the more technical jobs. Apart from the roadblocks which had to be removed, nearly twenty damaged bridges were repaired by the Welch Fusiliers on the stretch of road between Tamatave and Brickaville. Until locomotives were discovered, a few days later, in the sheds of Moramanga, halfway between Brickaville and Tananarive, progress along the railway was chiefly by trolley-car pushed by gangs of not unwilling Malgache. Working forward along the railway the South Lancashire, who received assistance from a troop of No. 5 Commando travelling light and using any means of transport available, reached Fanovana where, on September 23rd, the news arrived that the South Africans and the *askaris* had entered Tananarive. The 29th Brigade had hoped to share that honour, but to cover the distance from Tamatave in the time was a physical impossibility. Late next day men of the South Lancashire entered Moramanga where, on the 25th, they greeted the arrival of a troop of armoured cars and a company of King's African Rifles from Tananarive.

Second-Lieutenant Pryce-Bayley, 2nd South Lancashire, headed



a party of five which had been sent southward from Brickaville, to extend our influence to localities down the coast. They found considerable unrest and some confusion, but by a blend of boldness and tact they induced the local authorities to accept our occupation and succeeded in establishing a new régime of law and order as far south as Masomeloka and Marolambo.

On September 26th General Platt moved the main base of the expedition from Majunga to the more convenient Tamatave whence railway communication with the capital was only interrupted by the two demolished bridges at the river immediately north of Brickaville. Here a ferry to take heavy traffic was installed. Nearer Tamatave use was made of barges on a convenient canal.

The Commander-in-Chief held a ceremonial parade on October 3rd at Tananarive, detachments of all arms and services being present—South African armoured cars, King's African Rifles, men of our own County regiments, gunners and sappers, seamen and airmen of the Royal Navy, and contingents from the R.A.F. and the South African Air Force. General Platt decorated three East African warriors with the Military Medal, earned by exceptional prowess in action during the advance upon the capital. The inhabitants of all nationalities thoroughly enjoyed the occasion and, with the Tricolour much in evidence and due regard paid to French susceptibilities, the utmost amity prevailed.

## Journey's End

THE 'war' is not over yet, but the curtain now rises on the last act, the advance of the East African Brigade southward from Tananarive, which began on September 25th.

The Tanganyika Battalion (1/6th King's African Rifles) now found the leading infantry, but there was no respite for the devoted crews of the South African armoured cars. Indeed, the squadron had twice detached a troop for other duties, so the strain on those who remained with the column may be imagined. A number of the men were sick with malaria and some of the crews were reduced to two men.

There ensued the usual routine of clearing road-blocks and making deviations round the remains of bridges. At Sambaina land mines had been laid but, fortunately, were detected in time. A sharp encounter took place here, but another twenty miles brought the column to Antsirabe, a pleasant health resort where a halt of some

days was called. Now Commandant Machefaux enters the story. This French officer, with a small force, had been hovering upon the right flank of the column threatening to worry its communications but never actually doing so. During the halt at Antsirabe an attempt to ambush the gentleman on a side-road nearly succeeded, but only put us in possession of his personal kit and a prisoner or two. Though he continued at large Commandant Machefaux was never any real trouble.

On September 29th another South African contingent came into the picture by landing at Tulear on the south-west coast. Two companies of The Pretoria Regiment had left Diego Suarez by sea escorted by H.M.S. *Birmingham* and some destroyers. The expedition entered Tulear roadstead in the morning and called by radio for surrender. Tulear complied. There were few troops in the town and the attitude of the inhabitants, and even the officials, was all that could be desired.

It was during this period, too, that the Vichy air force gave some faint indications of its continued existence: a single Morane fighter appeared once or twice to machine-gun our advanced troops. Thereupon aircraft of the South African Air Force and the Fleet Air Arm proceeded to attack the airfields at Fianarantsoa and Ihosy, the only ones known to be still in occupation of the French. On October 8th the sorties were made, and it appears that four bombers and one fighter were damaged on the ground. This, at any rate, saw the end of the Vichy air force.

The East African Brigade left Antsirabe on the morning of October 9th with the Kenya Battalion (5th King's African Rifles) as leading infantry. Entering bare and rather forbidding hill country the column had a shock later in the day when a concealed machine-gun opened on a signals truck and killed or wounded twelve *askaris*. Next day armoured cars and artillery went into action against a position which was captured, with fifty prisoners, after a brief bombardment. Demolitions and road-blocks slowed up the advance to an exasperating degree on the 11th and again on the 12th when fire at close range from a field gun and two machine guns did considerable damage. An armoured car was hit by a shell, and Trooper Joubert won the Distinguished Conduct Medal by rescuing his own wounded officer under fire and dragging to cover, also, a wounded officer of the King's African Rifles. The Vichy guns were captured in a very gallant attack led by an English sergeant (Sergeant A. R. Seymour) of the King's African Rifles. He won the Military Medal.



As the column penetrated further into this part of the Madagascar tableland, which with its swirling mist bore a considerable resemblance to the Scottish Highlands, resistance seemed to be stiffening. On the 13th, before entering Ambositra, the 20th Battery of the 9th Field Regiment and the 56th (Uganda) Battery of the East African Artillery were called upon to deal with a strong detachment of Malgache who fought well for a time and then broke, leaving 200 prisoners in our hands. The vehicles did not reach the town until two days later, having been delayed by road demolitions and a blown river bridge. At Ambositra the column halted for three days.

Judging by the number of Malgache deserters, the Vichy forces appeared to be melting away, but the end was not yet. Before the advance was resumed reports were received of a strongly-held position about five miles ahead where the road passed into a horse-shoe of steep rocky hills affording the defenders excellent observation over all approaches. Brigadier Dimoline had no intention of walking into this trap. He sent the Tanganyika battalion to carry out a wide enveloping movement round both flanks, the *askaris* man-handling their mortars and machine guns over very difficult country. Then, on the 19th, in mist and drizzling rain the British and African gunners opened a short bombardment, after which the Kenya battalion delivered a frontal assault. This promised to be hot work, but as soon as the Tanganyikans opened fire from the Vichy rear all resistance collapsed. Over 800 prisoners were taken in this remarkable affair. We did not lose a man.

Road-blocks and active sniping continued to hamper the advance to Fianarantsoa. The next encounter was near Alakamisy where Brigadier Dimoline took advantage of a road loop to advance in two columns. Both made slow progress in the rain, being ever delayed by snipers and road-blocks, but early on October 29th the attacks went in after a short bombardment and our men had little trouble in collecting about 300 prisoners. Fianarantsoa was entered later in the day, but M. Annet had now withdrawn to Ihosy, more than 100 miles to the south-west. So, on November 1st the column advanced again. Three days later at a strong hill-position north of Ambalavao the Vichy forces made their last show of resistance—a very feeble show which yielded many willing prisoners. And M. Annet asked for an armistice, being at last in a reasonable frame of mind. On November 5th his envoy arrived at forward brigade headquarters to ask for terms of surrender. The terms, of course, were substantially the same as those which we had announced on

our first arrival in Madagascar. Now they were accepted with little demur, and hostilities actually ceased at 2 p.m. on this day. Shortly after midnight, November 5th/6th the instrument of capitulation was signed at Ambalavao.

On November 2nd a company of The Pretoria Regiment and three armoured cars had set out from Tulear along the road to Ihosy. Despite the usual obstructions 150 miles had been covered when news of the armistice arrived. The little force pushed ahead as fast as possible and entered Ihosy on November 8th. It is related that M. Annet himself—he was soon to become the involuntary guest of the South African Government—took the salute as the tired and dirty warriors of the Union drove past singing ‘Annie doesn’t live here any more’.

In the words of General Platt the capitulation had taken place ‘exactly eight weeks from the day, and 660 miles from the place, of landing at Majunga’. It had been an arduous business, this steeplechase to Tananarive and beyond; although they were fired on at comparatively few of the fences, the troops had had quite enough to endure and the results must have seemed unrewarding. M. Annet’s calculated policy of obstruction and retreat certainly caused us a lot of trouble and exertion; but it proved fatal to the morale of his own troops and merely postponed the inevitable end.

Our losses in action were slight. The East African Brigade counted five British officers and N.C.O.s killed and wounded, twenty *askaris* killed and seventy-six wounded. The South African armoured car squadron had six casualties. In the operations elsewhere during the eight weeks casualties amounted to thirty-five. The toll taken by sickness was another matter. Malaria is prevalent in most parts of Madagascar and many of the troops, working by day and often by night were a prey to the mosquito. Of the South African armoured car squadron half the men became malaria cases; a single battalion of the 29th Brigade reported 200 cases at one stage, and admissions to hospital from the brigade were a serious drain on its strength. The East African *askari* appears to have been immune from the disease.

When hostilities ceased much remained to be done before a new administration was firmly established—an administration under our friends and allies the Free French, with our old acquaintance of the Syrian campaign, General Legentilhomme, in control. He arrived in January 1943. Meanwhile there was still work for our political officers who had been of great service while our military forces were engaged; but our troops departed from the island as soon as their



task was done. A convoy carrying the 29th Brigade to South Africa had left Tamatave as early as October 18th.

The operations in Madagascar brought to a close the period during which the flank and rear of our Middle East position were finally cleared, and routes of supply to Egypt, Russia and India made secure. As we have seen, four minor campaigns—Iraq, Syria, Persia and Madagascar—were necessary to achieve these ends. Together they cover the most critical period of our struggle in the Middle East. The first of them, Iraq, opened in the very week that the German invader crossed the frontier of Egypt. The last, Madagascar, closed as the victory of Alamein was won.

## DODECANESE 1943



## CHAPTER I

# OBJECTIVE RHODES

### The Islands

NOMINALLY twelve in number, actually far more numerous, the Dodecanese islands lie to the south-west of Asia Minor. Much the largest and most important is the island of Rhodes, scene of two famous sieges in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when it was defended by the Knights Hospitallers against the Turks.

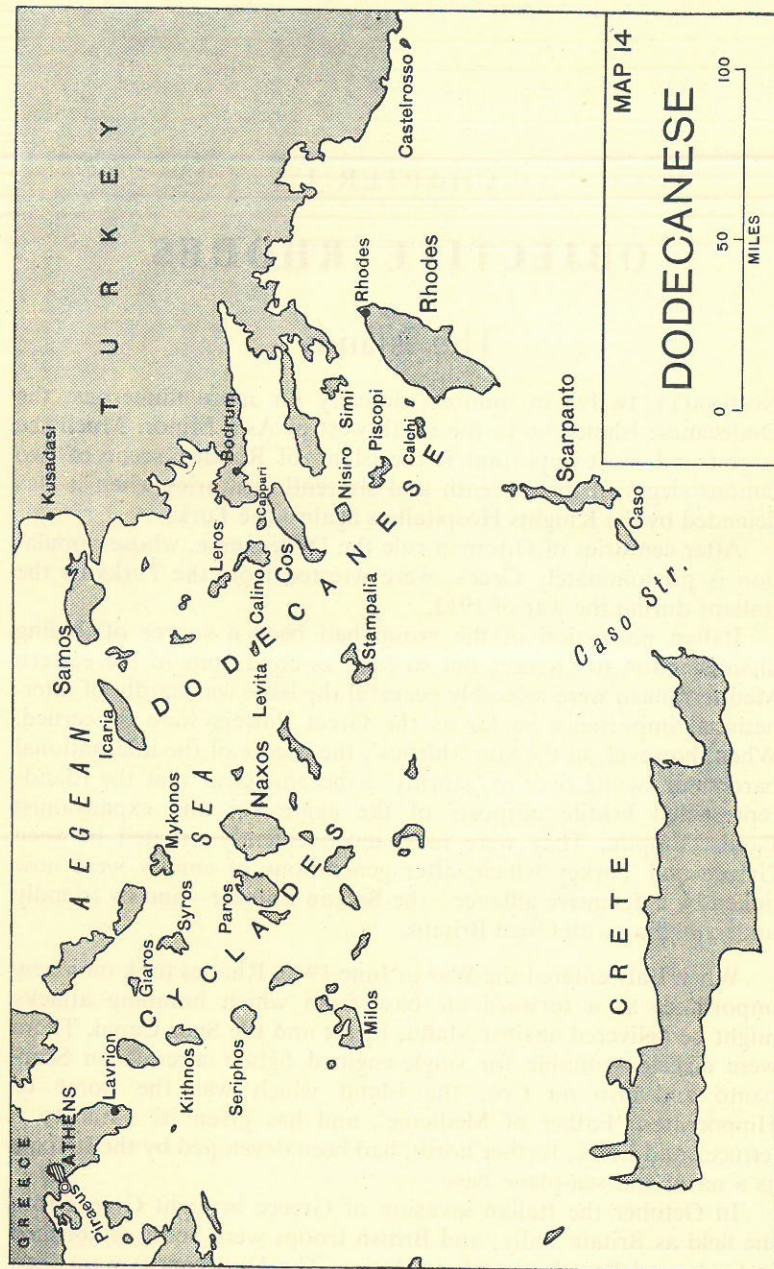
After centuries of Ottoman rule the Dodecanese, whose population is predominately Greek, were wrested from the Turks by the Italians during the war of 1912.

Italian possession of the group had been a source of abiding dissatisfaction to Greece; but so long as conditions in the eastern Mediterranean were tolerably peaceful the issue was hardly of international importance so far as the Great Powers were concerned. When, however, in the late 'thirties', the needle of the international barometer swung over to 'stormy' it became clear that the islands represented hostile outposts of the aggressive and expansionist Fascist Empire. They were most inconveniently situated between Greece and Turkey which, after generations of enmity were now linked by a defensive alliance—the Balkan Entente—and by friendly understanding with Great Britain.

When Italy entered the War in June 1940, Rhodes took on a new importance as a forward air base from which bombing attacks might be delivered against Malta, Egypt and the Suez Canal. There were airfields suitable for single-engined fighter aircraft on Scarpanto and also on Cos, the island which was the home of Hippocrates, 'Father of Medicine', and has given its name to a lettuce; and Leros, further north, had been developed by the Italians as a naval and sea-plane base.

In October the Italian invasion of Greece brought Greece into the field as Britain's ally; and British troops were soon established in Crete and British aircraft in Attica. The Dodecanese were then





largely isolated from Italy. But although the Anglo-Greek Alliance enabled British warships and British aircraft to bestride the sea route from Italy to the islands, Italian naval and air forces based on the Dodecanese constituted a permanent threat to our lines of communication between Egypt and the mainland of Greece. The threat would be intensified if we should send substantial armed forces to Greece and maintain them there. As told in a previous volume of this series, we did indeed embark upon the Greek adventure, and the desirability of clearing our flank from the menace of air and submarine attack by an operation against the Dodecanese was abundantly clear to Mr. Churchill and the Defence Committee. Before Christmas 1940, General Wavell had been instructed to prepare a plan, and there was some hope of launching an attack in April 1941, although our attempt in February to seize and hold Castelrosso—the tiny island situated some eighty miles east of Rhodes under the coast of Turkey—had not been successful.<sup>1</sup> General Wavell had already proved himself a master of improvisation but it is extremely doubtful if the Middle East Command could have found the means for such an expedition. In any case, when the tide of battle turned against us in North Africa at the beginning of April a Dodecanese venture became out of the question.

For the next two years the military significance of the islands as a whole receded, for they lay off the main route of advance and retreat of the contending armies. Germany elected to thrust eastward towards Moscow and Stalingrad. The successive British Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East were concerned with the task of clearing the Axis forces from North Africa. And when in May 1943 the end came at last in Africa and a quarter of a million German troops departed into captivity it was against Sicily and then against southern Italy that the spearhead of the Anglo-American offensive was aimed.

However, in the spring of 1943 when the centre of gravity had shifted from Cairo to Algiers and while Rommel was still struggling to stave off from west and east at Kasserine and Medinine the converging Allied armies, the Joint Planning Staff of the Middle East Command was engaged upon a scheme for a full-scale attack against Rhodes and the adjacent island of Scarpanto. This accomplished, the occupation of other islands in the Aegean would naturally follow. The plan contemplated the employment of comparatively large forces—far larger than could be provided at this or, it seems, at any subsequent time.

<sup>1</sup> See *Greece and Crete* by Christopher Buckley, p. 151.



So planning proceeded upon a smaller scale. The operational needs of the Middle East Command, to which Sir H. Maitland Wilson had succeeded in the previous February, were now subordinated to those of the Central Mediterranean Force which, under General Eisenhower with General Alexander as Deputy Commander-in-Chief in the field, invaded Sicily early in July and towards the end of August was preparing to carry the invasion into Italy. Middle East had reverted to the rôle of a base area, and a 'feeder' of the armies of Eisenhower.

The invasion of Italy and the preparations for 'Overlord'—the invasion of France to take place in the following year—were, by firm Allied agreement, the main strategical aims to be pursued in Europe. But subsidiary operations, where and when occasion offered and substantial advantage could be gained, were not absolutely ruled out. We know that the British Prime Minister was fully aware of the value of a successful strike at the Axis forces in the Aegean. If we could secure the air bases of Rhodes and Scarpanto Turkey would be delivered from the threat of air attack from this quarter and might be induced to enter the war against the aggressors. With Turkey an active ally the situation in the Balkans would be transformed.

General Wilson was anxious to act. During the month of August he assembled the 8th Indian Division in preparation for an attack upon Rhodes, held at this time by a weak German division, only 6,000 men, and by about 35,000 Italians. The assault landing had been fully rehearsed, the troops were actually embarked on the transports at Suez and were due to leave on September 1st. Then, on August 26th, Wilson learnt that the transports would not be available for the expedition. They were to proceed forthwith to India for employment in an operation for the reconquest of Arakan.

This demand was one of the results of the Allied policy to press the offensive against Japan. It snatched away Wilson's opportunity—and the Arakan enterprise was subsequently cancelled. The 8th Indian Division 'almost immediately' was claimed for the Italian campaign.

Then came the news of the Italian armistice, news which took General Wilson at a complete disadvantage. He had been informed of the negotiations with Marshal Badoglio<sup>1</sup> only a few days previously, and now had 'neither time, troops or shipping' to exploit the turn of events.

It seemed, however, that something might be accomplished by

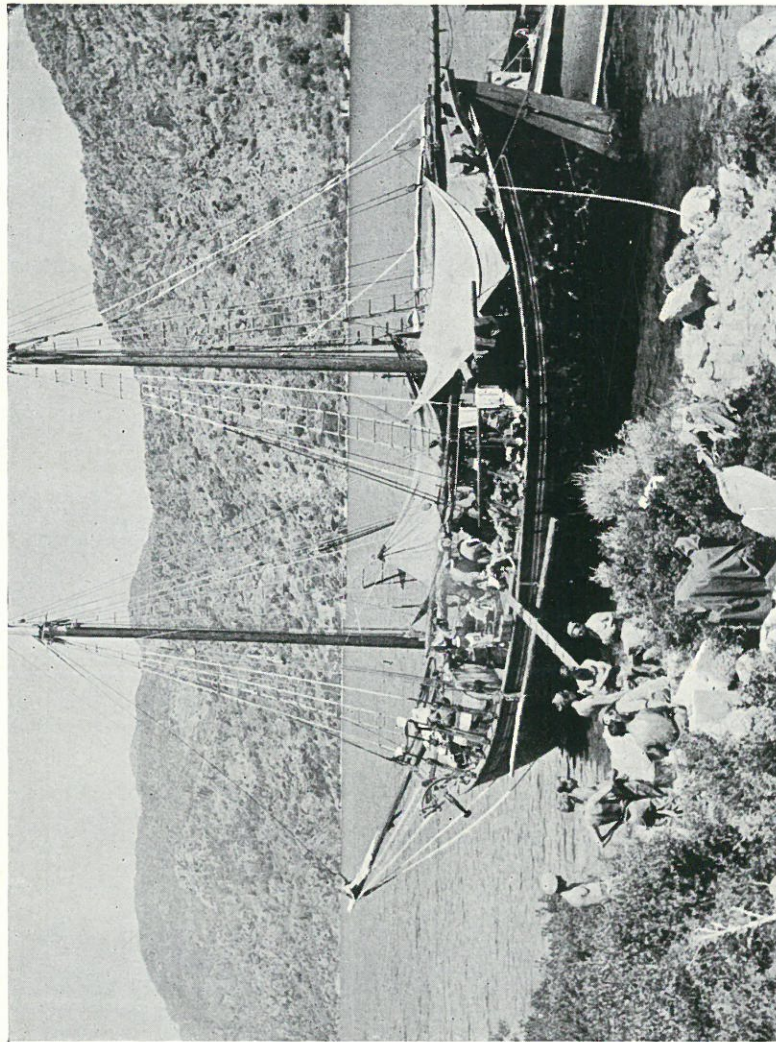
<sup>1</sup> See *The Campaign in Italy* by Eric Linklater, pp. 50-2.



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GERMAN BOMBERS ATTACK ITALIAN BATTERIES ON LEROS





Imperial War Museum

IN TURKISH WATERS

prompt action. Encouraged—if encouragement he needed—by a personal message from Mr. Churchill, the Commander-in-Chief decided to despatch to Rhodes the 234th Brigade, composed of Regular battalions which had helped to defend Malta and had left that island for Egypt in June. The task of the brigade was to assist the Italians in Rhodes to overpower the German troops and secure the port and airfields for the Allies. As the German air forces in Greece and the Aegean did not appear to be strong enough to act effectively against the invading flotilla there seemed to be a good chance of success.

But, as ever in war, time was all-important. To collect the necessary shipping and embark the brigade would take about ten days, so preparations were made to send one battalion on ahead in fast motor-vessels. First, however, it seemed imperative to make certain of the co-operation of the Italian forces in Rhodes. To this end a small mission was to be despatched at once to the island with the object of persuading the Italian commander Admiral Campioni to take immediate action against the Germans.

The Italian armistice had been announced to the world at 6 p.m. on September 8th. On the following morning an attempt was made to drop by parachute on Rhodes two British officers to make unobtrusive contact with Campioni whose forces outnumbered the Germans by nearly six to one.

By ill-fortune bad weather caused the attempt to be abandoned for the day. It was not until night that Major Lord Jellicoe, an interpreter officer, and a signaller were dropped on the island. The interpreter broke a leg in landing but the little party did indeed secure their interview with the Admiral without the Germans becoming aware of the visit. The Admiral was hospitable enough, but his position was a difficult one: the Italians had already clashed with the German troops who had taken possession of the airfields that day, and in some parts of the island fighting still continued. It was asking a great deal of Campioni that he should become an active ally when the Germans were already in the ascendant and we could not guarantee immediate and adequate military assistance.

By the morning of the 11th it was evident that the Germans were in almost complete control and Campioni broke off negotiations with us. He enabled Jellicoe's little party to make their escape to Castelrosso which, as will presently be related, was already in our hands. Jellicoe succeeded in bringing away valuable intelligence concerning minefields in the Aegean and the defences of Rhodes.

So the Germans held Rhodes, and they had taken over Crete



from the Italian forces and were also in control of Scarpanto which contained a good airfield. By securing firm possession of these islands the enemy had established a cordon of garrisons and airfields which barred our way into the Aegean Sea. Rhodes was the key to the situation and our assault upon the island was to go in as soon as the troops and shipping could be assembled. Meanwhile Middle East Command pursued the policy of penetration to other islands of the Aegean with the object of harassing the enemy sea communications between Greece and Rhodes as part of our preparations for the attack upon Rhodes itself; of neutralizing the effect of the successes which the Germans had already won over the Italians; and of creating a diversion to assist our operations in Italy.

To what extent Germany would be able or willing to reinforce the Aegean by drawing upon her troops and her air squadrons engaged in the Italian campaign or elsewhere remained to be seen. At this stage it still appeared to Middle East Command that 'the possibility of major seaborne or airborne German operations was slight'. If we could establish our fighters on Cos it should be possible to maintain ourselves on the islands of Cos, Leros and Samos until the attack could be launched against Rhodes. Cos was of particular importance, seeing that it contained the only airfield not occupied by the enemy. Until we secured it and established our single-seater fighters on the island we should be obliged to conduct our operations without air cover; for our nearest air bases, in Cyprus, were too far away.

It was unfortunate that owing to General Wilson's lack of resources he was condemned to such small beginnings.

## Penetration

FIRST upon the scene were detachments of the Special Boat Squadron (S.B.S.) who derived from the Commandos (Layforce<sup>1</sup>) by way of the Special Air Service Regiment in which every man was a parachutist. The S.B.S.—commanded by Jellicoe—were an amphibious body expert in the use of canoes, caiques, and any handy vessel which could be acquired. Sometimes they were conveyed in submarines, or in divers types of small surface craft possessed by the Royal Navy. They recruited brains rather than brawn, being experts in gathering and transmitting intelligence and capable of employing a simple and effective diplomacy when the soft answer seemed likely

<sup>1</sup> See *Greece and Crete* by Christopher Buckley, p. 238.

to serve better than the demolition charge, the hand-grenade or the Tommy gun. But they were masters of their weapons and their radio equipment, and ready and able to take risks.

Earlier in 1942, when known as the Special Boat Section, the S.B.S. had made themselves a nuisance to the Germans in occupation of Crete, and had accomplished some successful sabotage on Rhodes itself where they had destroyed a number of aircraft and blown up some ammunition dumps.

In the early morning of September 10th a detachment of about sixty—a few anti-aircraft gunners and R.A.F. signallers were included—arrived in naval launches off Castellrosso. The island was ours after a few shots had been fired, the Italian garrison proving 'co-operative' and the civil population 'elated'. There is no doubt that if a similar force of Germans from Rhodes had got in first it could have accomplished as much; but we were there and intended to stay.

Having handed over to a detachment of the R.A.F. Regiment, the S.B.S. left for Cos on the night of the 12th and entered Cos harbour next morning. Again there was a warm welcome from the inhabitants. The Italians—infantry and gunners—who numbered about 4,000 were ready, it seemed, to defend the island against the Germans, but were in poor shape to do so. They were widely dispersed and had little transport; the coast-defence batteries were not well equipped; and the air-raid warning system left much to be desired. The Italian commander insisted that strong reinforcements were required. This was true enough, and we were doing our best to supply them: meanwhile patrols of the S.B.S. assisted the Italian infantry who were now allotted for the defence of the airfield at Antimachia.<sup>1</sup>

Two Beaufighters, bringing an R.A.F. signal section, landed at 7.0 a.m. on 14th September and just before dusk six Spitfires and three Dakotas arrived at Antimachia. During the night 120 paratroops were dropped: they reinforced the defenders of the airfield and Jellicoe's men were then free to proceed with their mission.

They set out for Samos on the night of September 15th and next morning were hailed as liberators by the Greeks on the island. An officer from the British military mission at Ankara had already arrived, but the presence of 1,500 Blackshirt militia threatened trouble. However, the commander of the Italian garrison, General Solderelli, was friendly, the Fascist elements became more amenable, and certain defensive preparations were put in hand. One source of

<sup>1</sup> Map 15.



strength was the presence of about 1,500 Greek guerrilla troops whose fighting spirit was high.

Another S.B.S. detachment had called at Castelrosso, reached Cos on the 17th September and left that same night for the island of Simi. Our men were welcomed by the inhabitants, who were found to be rather short of food, and they established friendly relations with the small Italian garrison. Feeling between the Greeks and the Italians was high, but at least we saw to it that the peace was kept. Later in the month patrols landed secretly on Rhodes to gather information, and visits were paid to other islands: Piscopi, Calchi and Nisiro, and even Scarpanto where the Germans were in undisputed possession.

Now appear the Long Range Desert Group (L.R.D.G.), formed in July 1940 and honourably known for their reconnaissance and raiding activities far behind the enemy lines in North Africa. These occupations were of the past and the L.R.D.G. were now to operate not across the spacious desert but in cramped and rocky islands to which they were conveyed in destroyers, caiques and motor-launches through the restless waters of the Aegean.

A Squadron, composed of New Zealanders, arrived at Leros on September 22nd and three days later patrols were sent to the Cyclades to watch the movements of German aircraft and shipping from observation posts on the islands of Kithnos and Giaros. A patrol composed of Rhodesians was sent to Simi, and another patrol to Stampalia, while the remainder of the squadron was welcomed by the Greeks on Calino. Also to Calino came a party of the S.B.S., which had left Samos after the arrival of the 2nd Royal West Kent Regiment, brought in by destroyers from Haifa on the 23rd September via Leros, where one company had been left.

Another battalion of the 234th Brigade, the 2nd Royal Irish Fusiliers, and the personnel of the 28th Heavy A.A. Battery had already been landed at Leros; and a battery of the 3rd Light A.A. Regiment arrived there on September 27th. The artillery equipment was to follow. It was urgently needed, for on the previous day German bombers had attacked the harbour at Portolago,<sup>1</sup> sinking H.M. destroyer *Intrepid* and the Greek destroyer *Queen Olga*.

Cos, which contained our only possible fighter base, had been the first of the islands to be reinforced; at the middle of September the 1st Durham Light Infantry began to arrive by air transport from Haifa. Four companies in succession were thus flown in, but a Dakota carrying one platoon crashed in the sea east of the island

<sup>1</sup> Map. 16.

and, although all the occupants escaped uninjured, they were picked up by a Turkish craft and—for a short time—interned in Turkey. During the arrival of the fourth company on the 18th eight Messerschmitts machine-gunned Antimachia airfield,<sup>1</sup> setting fire to three of our aircraft but causing few casualties. It was judged wiser to send the battalion headquarters company and the heavier equipment by sea, and three destroyers—two British and one Greek—brought them safely in via Leros.

On the 20th occurred the first heavy bomber raid on Antimachia, and thereafter air attacks were delivered daily. Antimachia was the chief target, but as soon as the enemy discovered that we were at work on a landing-ground north-west of Cos town, that, too, received attention. The Durham L.I. toiled mightily. Not only had they to unload such stores as could be run into the small and inconvenient port of Cos, and to fill in bomb-craters—a never-ending task—on the landing-grounds; they also worked at the salt-pans near Marmari where drainage operations were in progress so that another air-strip could be provided. There seemed little chance of establishing a secure base for our fighters: in spite of the action of the Bofors guns which had been landed, the Antimachia landing-ground was always under attack. On one occasion it was reported to be 'littered with burning aircraft'—ours!

Detachments of the 1st Light A.A. Regiment (4th L.A.A. Battery), the 9th Indian Field Company and the R.A.F. Regiment had reinforced the D.L.I. who only mustered about 530 of all ranks; we still lacked the numbers and the armament for the proper defence of the island.

By the end of September we had established a footing on Cos, Leros, Samos and Simi, and on many other islands in the Dodecanese and the Cyclades we possessed observation posts who kept a lookout for German movement by sea and air. Middle East Command was doing what it could with its slender resources, in preparation for the ultimate purpose—the attack upon Rhodes. This attack—called 'Accolade'—had the explicit approval of the Chiefs of Staff Committee and was to be mounted before the end of October, 'with such forces as were available in the Middle East and could be spared from the Central Mediterranean'.

As regard the 'Central Mediterranean', General Eisenhower had already made it known that he would have little to spare, either of troops, shipping or aircraft, for he regarded any diversion of

<sup>1</sup> Map 15.



strength as prejudicial to his campaign in Italy. The land forces—known as 'Force 292' and commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Desmond Anderson—that General Wilson was using or about to use for the Aegean operations amounted to little more than the 234th Brigade and a number of artillery—chiefly anti-aircraft—and engineer units.

The attacks which the *Luftwaffe* had already delivered against Cos and Leros were of grave significance. There could be no doubt that the enemy was bringing powerful air reinforcements to Greece and Crete, probably from Italy, possibly from France and Russia. And we could give no protection against air attack to the surface forces of the Royal Navy. So great was soon to become the menace from the air that our ships could only operate effectively in the narrow waters of the Aegean during the hours of darkness. As each morning dawned they must retire south-eastward until they could obtain fighter cover from our nearest air bases—in Cyprus, 250 miles distant from Rhodes. The Navy maintained night patrols on the routes leading to the Dodecanese from the enemy bases in Greece and Crete, and were ready to hazard daylight action if German flotillas could be intercepted thereby. Such convoys were bound to pass through if the enemy wished to ensure the maintenance of his garrisons on Scarpanto and Rhodes, or to take the offensive against us. Sailing by day, with strong air escorts, the German craft lay up at night in the inlets of the islands, hiding from our warships.

At night, too, troops and military supplies were taken to Leros and Samos by our destroyers which dashed in through mine-infested waters, discharged with all haste, and then made the return passage. Submarines carried what they could by day or night. Our only other means of sea-borne transit was by small coasting vessels which went as far as Castelrosso and transhipped to caiques and similar craft for the passage to the islands. Use was made of Turkish territorial waters and the Turkish coast, and Turkey—a friendly neutral—afforded us more facilities as our need became greater. To a small extent it was found possible to fly in men and light armament, but this was a hazardous business, and our transport aircraft were limited in number.

## Cos

Cos is the most fertile island in the Aegean. A rugged limestone ridge extends for its whole length—about twenty-eight miles from south-

west to north-east—and falls abruptly to the south-eastern shore. The upper slopes of the ridge are terraced for the cultivation of olives and vines, and there is some pastureland. Although this shore is mostly cliff-bound, there are a number of open beaches and some tracts of flat ground, notably near Antimachia where the chief airfield was situate. On the opposite side of the island the slopes are more gentle. They are traversed by the main road from Cefalo to the town and harbour of Cos. Between the road and the sea the lower land is well cultivated, and the open nature of the coast, notably about the village of Marmari, gives a wide choice of landing places.

On 1st October, a German convoy was reported at sea, and next day was known to be in the area of Naxos,<sup>1</sup> sailing east. It was believed, 'on all available intelligence' to be bound for Rhodes. In any case the three destroyers—one British and two Greek—which were patrolling Caso Strait on the night of the 2nd were short of fuel and in no position to take action.

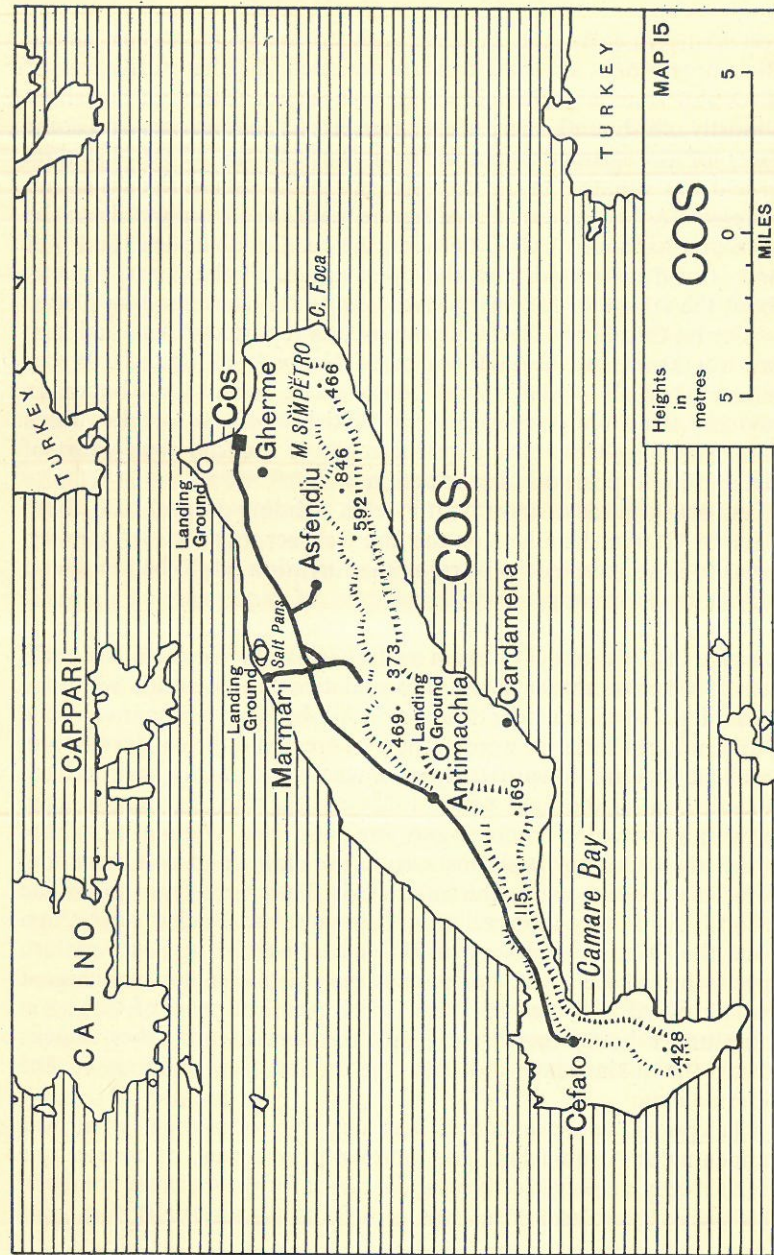
A heavy attack upon Antimachia landing-ground had been made by German bombers on the 2nd October, but the Cos garrison seems to have received no warning that invasion might be imminent. It came next morning.

Command headquarters at Cos town received a telephone message just before 6 a.m. from an Italian battery in the hills south-east of Gherme that a large ship and two landing-craft were approaching the shore near Marmari. All but one company of the Durham Light Infantry were in the Cos area, and the carrier platoon was sent forward towards the coast where the enemy had, indeed, landed. During the fight which followed, the carriers were obliged to withdraw under machine-gun fire, and two companies of the D.L.I. then took up positions astride the main road and extending as far as the beach to bar the way to Cos. They were very thin on the ground. As it was reported that Germans had landed near Capa Foca the D.L.I. had also to find men to watch the south-eastern approaches to the town; but the advance of this enemy detachment was westward into the hills. The D.L.I. positions west of Cos soon came under heavy mortar fire, and frequent dive-bomber attacks struck the main road and also the Italian gun-positions in the Gherme area.

Telephone communication was cut. No one knew what was happening at Antimachia. The landing-ground was, of course, one of the enemy's chief objectives, and a target for the German bombers. Our anti-aircraft armament was of little avail, for the Bofors guns

<sup>1</sup> Map 14.





upon which we had to rely could do little against high-level bombing. Presently clusters of transport aircraft appeared and paratroops descended to begin a struggle which continued until evening. It seems that the Germans may have received seaborne reinforcements from the troops which landed on the coast nearer Camare Bay; at any rate, by the afternoon they were able to put in a well-organized attack supported by mortar fire. The defenders, who included one company of D.L.I. numbering less than ninety, a contingent of the R.A.F. Regiment, some of our paratroopers and a number of Italians, fought stoutly. It was evening before they were completely over-run; and they destroyed the Bofors guns before the end came. Some of the survivors made their way southward towards Cardamena. Their only hope was to find some means of escape from the island.

Further away to the south-west the Germans had landed at Camare Bay and driven northward into the hills the Italian battalion which opposed them. Even so, it was reported that Italian resistance in this quarter was not entirely quelled until next morning.

Near the town of Cos, too, we were overmatched. At about 9 a.m. about eighteen Stukas dive-bombed the reserve company of the Durham Light Infantry which had just come forward south of the main road. Half the men were killed or wounded, and the remainder of the company swung back, in touch on their left with two companies of Italian infantry which were fighting well.

The Germans, at least a battalion strong, now increased their efforts, using infantry guns, two anti-tank guns and a number of mortars. At intervals dive-bombing attacks were made against our forward posts. But, although parties of Germans had filtered through our thinly-held position and casualties were heavy, our men held on until the onslaught slackened.

The fight had spread to the Cos landing-ground where a dogged resistance was offered by men of the R.A.F., R.E.—a party of the 74th Field Company had been flown in on the previous night—and a detachment of the D.L.I.

During the afternoon the enemy came on with fresh energy, supported by a heavier fire from his guns and mortars. He began to over-run our forward positions, compelling withdrawal to a line which included the edge of the landing-ground and the village of Gherme, but German pressure eventually compelled a further retreat to the edge of Cos town. Before 7 p.m. attackers and defenders were again in close contact, mortar fire was heavy on our centres of resistance, and the harbour area was being shelled.



One company, consisting of about forty men, which had been cut off, made its way into the hills above Gherme where it joined an Italian battery, still in action though under heavy air attack. An infantry attack upon the guns, launched from the south-east, was repulsed by the British and Italians; and after darkness fell and the fighting had died down, the company managed to make its way into Cos.

In the town, Lieutenant-Colonel R. F. Kirby, commanding the D.L.I., was holding a conference of company commanders when two mortar bombs fell among the group. The colonel, who had only rejoined his battalion from hospital after the invasion began, was wounded; so also were three other officers, one of them mortally.

For the moment there was a breathing space, but our dwindling forces had little prospect of maintaining themselves for long among the houses, stone walls and olive groves which offered so many concealed approaches to a determined attacker, well supported by mortars and guns and master of the air. Colonel L. F. R. Kenyon, commanding the garrison, ordered a withdrawal of all troops, covered by a rearguard, into the hills where he hoped to continue the fight in guerrilla fashion. It was necessary to move in small parties in order to escape observation, and all were to lie up as soon as morning came. The eventual rendezvous was to be the village of Asfendiu which contained an Italian food dump.

The rearguard fought stoutly until overwhelmed. By dawn of October 4th most of those who had taken to the hills were in the region of Mount Simpetro; but unorganized parties of exhausted men, some without food, some suffering from sand-fly fever or malaria, are capable of little effort. Anyhow, Asfendiu was now in German hands. There was some mortar and rifle fire during the morning, but resistance was virtually at an end. Greek shepherds befriended some of our men: those who could do so made their way back to the coast in the hope of finding means to make the passage to the Turkish shore.

That so many of the garrison were rescued is largely to the credit of the S.B.S. who, operating in small naval craft, spent eight successive nights picking up small parties from the coast of Cos. Some of these were conveyed to Turkey, some to Castellosso. Altogether, by one means or another, several hundred British and quite a number of Italians were brought away. The remainder of the 1,300 combatants who formed the British garrison of Cos were either killed or, wounded and unwounded, fell into German hands.

Force 292 Headquarters, in Egypt, could do nothing to help before the last message, obviously delayed, was received from Colonel Kenyon at five minutes past six on the morning of October 4th: 'Cos town untenable: intend to continue the fight elsewhere.'

Vital armaments—notably heavy A.A. guns—had been made ready, but we were unable to land them on the island before the Germans struck. When they did so, equipment for a proper air-raid warning system was actually on its way. Sorties of R.A.F. Beau-fighters, made at great risk throughout the morning of October 3rd, had not been able to affect the issue.

The loss of Cos showed beyond all question that, despite their heavy commitments elsewhere, the Germans were determined upon bold counter-measures in the Aegean. They were employing powerful air forces and a number of well-trained troops and had collected in Greek harbours the necessary shipping. It was estimated that the invasion flotilla for Cos comprised seven large transports, seven landing-craft and a number of caiques, escorted by three destroyers. Incidentally the Germans had made use of an anchorage at Cappari, where they landed men and thereby caused the withdrawal of our L.R.D.G. patrols from that island and from Calino to Leros. The troops employed amounted to 'a brigade group of all arms', but it was the German command of the air which had ensured the success of the expedition—a success which put an end to our attempts to establish a fighter-base in the Aegean.



## CHAPTER II

# NO ACCOLADE

### The Narrow Seas

WE were now upon the defensive, and must expect the enemy to strike again. On October 2nd a bombing attack on Leros had so damaged the Italian destroyer *Euro* that she had to be beached. Shipping at Leros continued to be the main target of the *Luftwaffe*.<sup>1</sup>

On 5th October Middle East Command warned General Anderson that the enemy obviously possessed sufficient shipping to launch an attack upon either Samos or Leros 'during the next few days'. Probably Leros would be his objective. Leros and Samos must be held; they must be reinforced and organized for defence, and observation posts established in islands on the possible lines of approach. Arrangements for patrolling by cruiser, destroyer and submarine had been made by the Royal Navy, and the R.A.F. would carry out a systematic bombing of German airfields in Greece and in the Crete-Rhodes area.

These measures were to be taken 'pending the capture of Rhodes', for the attack on Rhodes had not been cancelled.

Early on the morning of October 6th a report was received from a submarine patrol of a German convoy moving from Greece. The L.R.D.G. on Kithnos later gave the enemy's position as north-east of that island, heading south-eastward. That night the Royal Navy—two cruisers and two destroyers—intercepted the convoy and sank an ammunition ship, an armed trawler and six landing-craft. Subsequently a landing-craft and a small escort vessel, both badly damaged, arrived at Stampalia and together with eighty prisoners were captured by our garrison. Two field guns and three trucks also fell into our hands. It was estimated that as a result of this naval encounter the Germans lost upwards of 1,600 men.

On October 7th an enemy detachment, nearly 100 strong, from Rhodes succeeded in landing on Simi and a brisk little battle ensued.

<sup>1</sup> Map 14.

The garrison of 150 Italians was backed by forty of our airmen and twenty-five of the S.B.S. By the afternoon the Germans were glad to withdraw, having lost twenty killed and six prisoners; they managed to embark about thirty wounded men. Our losses were very few indeed.

These local successes, gratifying in their way, were won at the time when the British Prime Minister tried and failed to obtain the additional forces considered necessary for the capture of Rhodes. His personal intervention did not succeed in diverting from the Italian campaign, or from the preparations for the invasion of North-West Europe, the troops, air power and landing-craft for what he saw as a short-term operation promising big results. Rhodes in our hands; the threat of the Nazi bomber removed from Turkish towns; the opening of the Aegean Sea; Turkey an active ally; a tremendous impulse given to the resistance movements in the Balkan countries—would this have been the sequence of events, and, if so, with what effect upon the course of the War?

It was not to be. On October 10th was held near Tunis a meeting at which General Eisenhower, the First Sea Lord (Sir Andrew Cunningham) and all the Commanders-in-Chief of the Mediterranean were present. Here a decision was taken that no diversion of forces for the capture of Rhodes could be undertaken until the Allies had entered Rome. In the meantime we should hold Leros and Samos so long as supplies to the islands could be maintained.

None could then foresee how long and arduous would be the road to Rome which did not fall to us until June of the following year. There was to be no Accolade.

On the 15th October, General Anderson instructed Major-General F. G. Brittorous (commanding the 234th Brigade) to defend Leros and Samos, with outposts on outlying islands, and to develop an offensive policy 'as far as possible'. The attack on Rhodes 'having been postponed indefinitely', intelligence regarding the island should be systematically collected.

It is worthy of note that patrols of the S.B.S. worked in secret on Rhodes from the 2nd to the 19th October.

The destruction of the German convoy on the night of October 6th/7th, our naval operations in general, and a bombing offensive conducted from North Africa and Cyprus against enemy air bases in Greece and Crete, all contributed to retard the German preparations for an attack upon Leros. Our warships sunk many a German craft and, sometimes by moonlight, bombarded the harbours of



German-held islands; but the eastward movement of enemy convoys laden with troops, supplies and munitions and escorted by aircraft, could only be hampered, not prevented. At the same time we proceeded with the task of building up the defensive strength of Leros and Samos. The supply route organized, Castelrosso to Samos and thence to Leros, did not suffice; so our destroyers continued to make the direct passage by night. They were constantly shadowed and attacked by the *Luftwaffe* during their approach to and withdrawal from Leros.

During October we ran into Leros by night twelve Bofors guns, four 25-pdrs., a number of jeeps, many items of equipment and certain parties of technical troops, using destroyers, submarines and smaller craft. Mortars and machine guns, ammunition and wireless equipment, were dropped by parachute. On the 22nd the destroyers *Eclipse* and *Petard* left Alexandria for Leros carrying the 4th Buffs. The *Eclipse* struck a mine off Cos and sank with the loss of seven officers and 128 other ranks of the Buffs. The survivors, among them the commanding officer, were landed at Leros with the rest of the battalion.

The Navy, with such assistance as could be provided by Beau-fighters and a number of naval aircraft, was doing all that was possible, but paid the inevitable price in valuable ships and no less valuable men. In October the cruisers *Penelope*, *Aurora* and *Sirius* were damaged by air attack; in addition to the *Eclipse* we lost the destroyers *Panther* by bombing and *Hurworth* by mine, and the *Belvoir* was damaged by air attack. The Greek destroyer *Adrias* struck a mine and was beached on the coast of Turkey.

Leros was attacked almost daily by German bombers who directed much of their attention to the Italian-manned coast-defence batteries: on one occasion delayed-action mines dropped in Portolago Bay temporarily closed the port to our shipping.

Castelrosso, where the garrison had been strengthened by the arrival of the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles (less two companies) from Haifa, suffered its first air raid on October 17th.

The Germans were strengthening their grip upon the islands lying further to the west, most of them containing weak Italian garrisons which were in no condition to resist even if they were inclined to do so. Syros, in the centre of the Cyclades group, Naxos and Mykonos, and Milos to the south-west, all were occupied. Also, German detachments were landed on the islands adjacent to the Turkish coast in the northern part of the Aegean Sea.

The New Zealanders of the L.R.D.G. patrol who were keeping

observation from Kithnos remained on the island a month and were never discovered by a party of Germans who landed there. These New Zealanders moved later to Seriphos and continued to relay valuable information whereby we were able, by sudden air attack, to account for a number of German vessels and aircraft. Even in Naxos the L.R.D.G. were discreetly active.

The island of Levita, where the Germans were very much on the alert, was attacked by the L.R.D.G. on October 23rd, a desperate venture which ended in disaster. Forty-eight men, half of them from the New Zealand squadron, made a difficult landing from a rough sea and, after a sharp and prolonged struggle, were overwhelmed. Forty of our men were lost at Levita.

At the end of October command of our land forces in the Aegean was placed directly under General Headquarters Middle East, Force 292 being abolished.

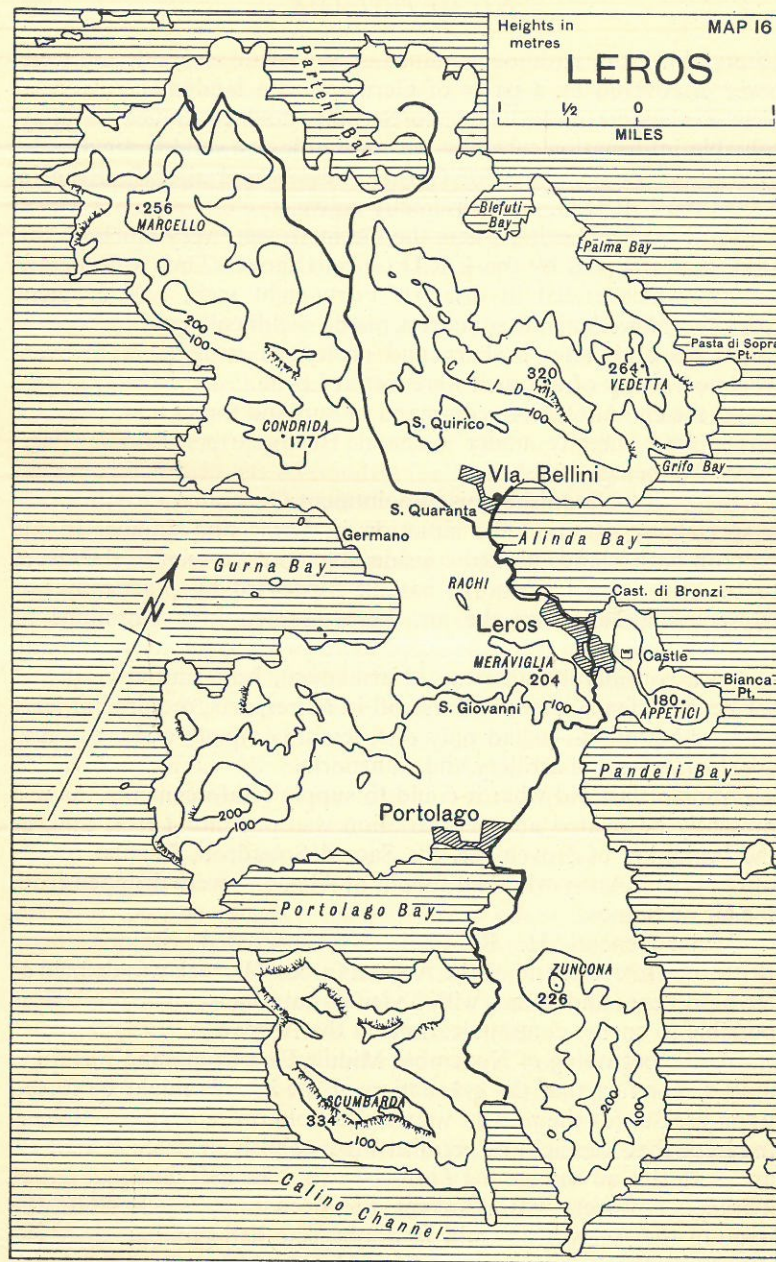
Before he relinquished his appointment General Anderson made a special report upon the situation in Leros and Samos. In his opinion both islands needed considerable reinforcement if they were to be held against sea-borne assault supported by practically unhampered attack from the air. Leros needed four battalions of British infantry—at this time it possessed two and an extra company—and a considerable increase in armament, both anti-aircraft and for beach defence. Samos, worse off in all respects, required at least another battalion—it had only one, less a company at Leros—and considerably more artillery and transport.

Middle East did what it could to supply reinforcements. As will presently be related another battalion was put into Leros, and, at the beginning of November, the Sacred Squadron, Regular troops of the Greek Army who had fought at Alamein, were dropped from the air on Samos.

Major-General H. R. Hall now succeeded Major-General Brittorous in command of the Aegean forces. His task was defined as 'to hold Leros and Samos with a view to causing as much damage as possible to enemy communications in the Aegean'.

At the beginning of November Middle East Command was quite alive to the fact that the evacuation of the islands might be forced upon us. But for the present we were to hold on. There was a lingering hope that we might be permitted to establish air bases in Turkey, and with this advantage the *Luftwaffe* might be met on equal terms. Turkey, however, was reluctant to concede so much while the issue in the Aegean was still in doubt. She had gone as far as she dared in allowing us to use, discreetly, Turkish soil and Turkish





territorial waters as a line of supply. To grant us the airfields we sought would, undoubtedly be construed by Germany as an act of open war and bring swift retribution from the German bombers based on Rhodes and on the airfields of Macedonia.

On November 6th Mr. Eden, our Foreign Secretary, returning from conference in Moscow by way of Ankara, was given a final definite refusal by Turkey. With no hope of providing air cover by fighters based on Turkish soil the case for the evacuation of Leros and Samos was strengthened. But evacuation required a period of dark moonless nights, and these were not due until November 26th. In the meantime the Germans struck.

Major-General Hall arrived at Leros on November 5th and succeeded in securing a fair degree of co-operation from the Italian commander whose attitude, so far, had been doubtful. The next business was to reorganize the defence of the island which Brigadier R. Tilney, named Fortress Commander, proceeded to do. General Hall left for Samos, where his headquarters had been established, on November 11th: as it happened on the eve of the German assault.

## Leros

THE island of Leros consists of three areas of rocky hill-country joined together by two narrow necks of land each less than a mile in breadth. The steep hills, scored by deep ravines, and the thickly-cultivated areas on the lower ground with their walls of stone and rubble, restrict the movement of vehicles to the few roads and tracks. There is no site for an airfield. Of the coastline of forty-five miles the beaches suitable for landing operations do not amount to eight miles in all. But small parties could well gain a footing at the heads of the many deep bays.

With the arrival of the 1st King's Own, sent in destroyers from Alexandria via Cyprus and landed in the night on November 5th, Brigadier Tilney had three British battalions at his disposal and an extra company—but no battalion mustered as many as 600 officers and men.

The nature of the country, with its indifferent communications, caused the brigadier to decide upon a decentralized defence, three areas, each more or less self-contained, under a battalion commander. To the 4th Buffs was allotted the northern portion of the island, with one company of the King's Own, designated 'Fortress reserve' located just north of Gurna Bay; the 2nd Royal Irish



Fusiliers, with the Royal West Kent company, defended the centre portion which included the neck of land between Gurna Bay and Alinda Bay, Leros town and Mount Meraviglia, where Fortress Headquarters was established in a tunnel, 200 yards long, hewn out of the solid rock; the 1st King's Own was responsible for the southern area including both shores of Portolago Bay and Portolago itself.

There were neither the armament nor the equipment to provide for adequate beach defence, and the necessary troops were lacking. Also our anti-aircraft resources were extremely limited. The Bofors guns of the 3rd Light A.A. Battery had, as their chief task, the protection of Fortress Headquarters, the 25-pdrs. and the Italian batteries. They were far too few for these purposes; and, even so, on November 8th half of them were moved down near Alinda Bay to undertake an 'anti-shipping rôle'. The beaches in this quarter were patrolled by the S.B.S.

The Italian coast-defence batteries, manned by naval gunners, were not well sited and their fire-control equipment was out of date. They had not much ammunition. During October the Mount Marcello and Mount Zuncona batteries had suffered severely from German air-raids. The fighting efficiency of the Italians was much increased by sending L.R.D.G. patrols to the battery positions, for our men established their own observation posts, and their radio equipment provided a reliable means of communication.

Not much was to be expected of the Italian anti-aircraft detachments, which were poorly trained and equipped. The remainder of the Italian garrison, in like case, was employed as 'line of communication troops'.

From the first days of November there were indications that the attack against Leros, postponed through the activities of the Royal Navy and R.A.F. and by subsequent unfavourable weather conditions, was now imminent. On November 3rd and 4th landing-craft and escorts were sighted by aerial reconnaissance lying off Lavrion, near the south-eastern extremity of Greece.<sup>1</sup> On November 5th they started to sail eastward, and the following evening the flotilla arrived off Paros. It moved with extreme circumspection, sailing only by day under heavy fighter protection and lying up at night off one or other of the innumerable islands that stud the Aegean. Efforts made by units of the Navy and R.A.F. to intercept and destroy the flotilla proved unavailing owing to the scale of enemy fighter cover by day and the difficulty of spotting the ships by night. By the night

<sup>1</sup> Map 14.

of November 10th the invasion fleet had reached the shelter of Cos and Calino and no possible doubt could be entertained as regards its purpose and destination. The bombing of Leros, which had ceased during the last days of October, was now resumed with intensity, and the British troops moved into battle stations to await the attack.

It was about four-thirty on the morning of November 12th when light was growing in the east, that the enemy invasion fleet was sighted from the look-out posts on the island, approaching from both east and west with a view presumably to landing in the bays on either side of Leros. The Italian coastal guns opened fire, churning the sea around the ships and scoring more than one direct hit as the landing-craft approached the shore; Bofors guns and the 25-pdrs. in the Germano area also came into action, and our anti-aircraft defence engaged the Stukas which were swooping in from the sea to neutralize the fire of the shore batteries.

It is claimed that six landing-craft conveying troops were sunk by our gunfire; nevertheless in the north-east of the island about 500 Germans came ashore in Palma Bay and near Pasta di Sopra Point. Their advance inland, covered by mortar fire, reached Mount Vedetta; for the moment they could make no further progress against the resistance of the Buffs. Later in the morning a platoon of the Buffs fought a successful little action near Grifo Bay, capturing three officers and forty-five other Germans. Although exposed to constant air attack our men had tackled the invaders in splendid style.

Another landing, however, had been made in a more vital quarter: Pandeli Bay and near Point Bianca. Here the enemy was close to Leros town. Above the town is Castle Hill, crowned by an old fortress once used by the Crusaders; further east on a peninsula is Mount Appetici which looks down upon the bay. Possession of these heights would threaten Fortress Headquarters at Meraviglia and protect the beach-head.

The Germans tried for both objectives and were making good progress towards the Italian gun positions when a company of the Royal Irish Fusiliers went into the attack with great spirit and tumbled the invaders back down the slopes of the hills. The Fusiliers were too few in numbers to finish the business by driving the Germans into the sea: they could do no more than confine them to the lower slopes of Mount Appetici. Casualties on both sides had been heavy.

The Buffs, and the L.R.D.G. patrols which were with them, had a great area to cover and were not strong enough to do so effectively. During the morning the enemy secured a footing on Mount Clidi,



and in response to an appeal for assistance Brigadier Tilney sent forward from the area north of Gurna Bay the company of the King's Own which constituted the Fortress reserve. This company came up in jeeps. When it deployed to attack, the fire of its machine guns was smothered by that of the German mortars, and the first effort was checked. Our men rallied and gained a little ground, but in the confused fighting which followed they were slowly forced back westward.

Our troops were struggling against the handicap of persistent and almost unhindered air attack—it is reckoned that the enemy flew about 500 sorties during the day—for our anti-aircraft defence could make little impression upon the *Luftwaffe*. Worse still, the expected airborne attack came in the early afternoon.

About 2 p.m. fighter-bombers spraying fire from the machine guns in their wings and pounding the rugged slopes with high explosive swept over the island from the south-west. Behind them flew the slower-moving JU 52 aircraft, and from these belled out mushroom-like puffs. Parachutists were dropping on Leros as, early in the War, they had dropped on Rotterdam, later on Corinth and then on Crete, and, less than six weeks before, on Cos.

There were, perhaps, 500 of them. They descended upon one of the few parts of the island where the ground was open and comparatively flat: the neck of land between Alinda Bay and Gurna Bay which rises to Rachi ridge.

It was unfortunate that the reserve company of the King's Own was already engaged to the northward; in the fight which followed part of the Irish Fusiliers was joined by the company of the Royal West Kent and by men of the L.R.D.G. (a British and a New Zealand patrol) and the S.B.S. who moved back from Alinda Bay. A company of the Buffs assisted by fire from Mount Condrida.

The struggle with the paratroopers continued for several hours, with heavy loss to both sides, but we could not clear them from Rachi ridge; and telephone communication between Fortress Headquarters and the Buffs in the north was cut.

It was Brigadier Tilney's intention to counter-attack Rachi that night from the south with two companies of the Irish Fusiliers and one of the King's Own. Most of these troops had been fighting hard, and to reorganize them and ensure their concentration in the darkness proved difficult indeed. It was the tale of Crete over again. Not more than one company reached the rendezvous, so the counter-attack was postponed.

An urgent message asking for reinforcements had been sent to

Samos, but none could be despatched on this night owing to lack of suitable craft to convey them. The Germans had done better. They brought in more troops by sea to strengthen their hold under Mount Appetici.

Some of our destroyers had swept the area south-west of Leros after darkness fell, in the hope of intercepting German reinforcements. No enemy vessels were seen, but later in the night Germans on Clidi were bombarded from the eastward.

November 13th dawned with cloudy skies, high wind and heavy seas, conditions which seemed to favour the defence, for further German landings by sea or by air were bound to prove hazardous and costly.

Yet at 5 a.m. an ammunition lighter was seen creeping along the north shore of Alinda Bay. It was shelled by the Italian battery at Castello di Bronzi and by our Bofors guns and ran aground burning from stem to stern.

Then, at 7 a.m. a second parachute landing was made in the Rachi area. Again coming in from the south-west, the German aircraft were buffeted by the high wind and were greeted with considerable anti-aircraft fire. Our Bofors guns claimed three machines, two shot down in Alinda Bay and a third which jettisoned its occupants at too low a level so that they fell on the ground or in the water with parachutes unopened. Nevertheless the Germans on Rachi received valuable reinforcement.

Elsewhere the day went ill for us. After taking full possession of Clidi the enemy secured S. Quirico and then pushed steadily southward into the built-up area along Alinda Bay. Here he suffered considerable loss from the fire of the 25-pdrs. at S. Giovanni, but penetrated as far as Villa Belleni.

And about noon we lost Mount Appetici and Castle Hill where our troops were too few to sustain the efforts of the Italian garrison; but the Germans made no attempt to follow up this success. For the rest of the day the heavy attacks of the *Luftwaffe* gave us little chance for further action.

At night, however, a counter-attack against Appetici did go in, though not with the strength intended; only one company of the Irish Fusiliers and part of the King's Own could be collected for it. Lieutenant-Colonel M. French of the Fusiliers was in command, and our men fought steadily upward towards the crest. But elsewhere the Germans were not idle. About 10 p.m. they launched from Rachi against Meraviglia a heavy attack covered by the fire of their mortars. Concerned for the safety of Fortress Headquarters Brigadier



Tilney tried to call off the Appetici attack in order to have more troops to meet this new menace. Loth to relinquish the advantage he had gained, Colonel French sent back only the rear company of the King's Own; but the attack from Rachi was repulsed before this reinforcement could come into action.

The fighting at Appetici continued until well after the dawn of the 14th. Parties of the King's Own captured the crest, but only at considerable cost. Then, after heavy mortar fire, the Germans, 'every man a Tommy-gunner', attacked in their turn. We could not hold them and were forced back down the hill amid showers of grenades. Colonel French, whose resolute leadership had made our early success possible, was among the killed.

The night of the 13th had not passed without another effort by the Buffs, one company making a gallant but unsuccessful attempt to recapture S. Quirico.

At 7 a.m. on the morning of the 14th Brigadier Tilney reported to Samos that, although the situation was critical, there was 'still a chance'. He hoped to retake Rachi; and, actually, although the *Luftwaffe* flew about 400 sorties during the day, we hit back with considerable success.

A company of the Buffs was launched at Clidi and drove the Germans off it. Another company recaptured S. Quirico and a further advance was checked north of Villa Belleni in the afternoon only by heavy attacks from the air. The Buffs, who had captured about 130 prisoners, were now in almost full possession of their part of the island, although one company was obliged to remain on Clidi to keep watch on the Germans who were still in occupation of Mount Vedetta. L.R.D.G. and S.B.S. patrols were on the alert to prevent German infiltration northward from the Rachi area.

At Rachi, also, we had made progress. The Fusiliers and the King's Own gained ground and took prisoners in an attack from the south-west, and would have done better still had they not been exposed to the accurate bombing and machine-gunning of the German aircraft. Attacks from the air also knocked out 25-pdr. and Bofors guns and destroyed precious ammunition.

The L.R.D.G. patrol at the Scumbarda battery were able to direct the fire of the Italian guns in a landward shoot which cleared the Meraviglia ridge, it is said 'with only two feet to spare', and shelled with considerable effect the southern shore of Alinda Bay.

One result of the day was to restore communication between Fortress Headquarters and the northern part of the island. Confused fighting continued in many quarters after darkness

fell; yet L.R.D.G. patrols which entered Leros town shortly before midnight found the streets and buildings quiet and deserted.

At Portolago during the night the Royal Navy landed two companies of the Royal West Kent from Samos. The evacuation of wounded to Samos continued. This was all to the good, but the late arrival of H.M. destroyer *Echo*—through no fault of her own, for she had many missions to fulfil—made impossible a projected bombardment of that part of the Rachi area which was still in possession of the enemy.

At 10 a.m. on the 15th Brigadier Tilney tried another attack, with such troops as could be collected, in order to clear the Germans from the Rachi spur. This effort very nearly succeeded in spite of the efforts of the *Luftwaffe* to smash it. By 1.0 p.m. a company of the West Kent was driving the Germans before it, and later we occupied both the northern and western slopes of the spur. Then a tragic confusion of orders led to the evacuation of most of the ground we had won; and the Buffs, who were to have advanced into the Quaranta region never received the expected signal to start. This gallant battalion was wasting away, for now two of its companies each mustered but sixty men and another company no more than forty. Yet their fighting spirit was unsubdued. Late in the evening a patrol of the Buffs was hotly engaged at Villa Belleni.

The Germans were certainly held in check on this day, though at considerable cost. They were on Mount Vedetta and held a coastal strip of Alinda Bay, Rachi, and the southern shore of the bay round to Appetici. Their great advantage lay in their command of the air. Some of our Beaufighters had made fleeting appearances over the island; but they were far too few and, in any case, a Beaufighter was no match for a Messerschmitt.

Before midnight a patrol of the L.R.D.G., which sought to visit Leros town again, was greeted by the fire of Tommy guns and snipers and assailed by hand grenades. In this affair Lieutenant-Colonel Easonsmith, commanding the L.R.D.G., was killed.

It seemed that the enemy was tightening his grip upon the whole region between Rachi and Appetici and was making ready to move south from Leros town.

During the night another company of the Royal West Kent from Samos was landed at Portolago and 171 German prisoners were sent to Samos in a caique manned by Italians. Not so far away, however, the Germans were bringing in important reinforcements at Alinda Bay; perhaps as many as a thousand fighting troops and certainly 88-mm. guns, tractors, and other heavy equipment.



The odds against us appeared to be mounting. Our losses in artillery, bombed from the air, had been considerable; ammunition was running low; our troops, after four days and nights of fighting were tired to the point of exhaustion. Many were suffering acutely from thirst for, although there was plenty of water on the island, the distribution of supplies was becoming more and more difficult.

About dawn of the 16th the Germans who had cautiously felt their way southward from Leros town came in contact with the newly-arrived company of the West Kent which barred the Portolago road.

At 7 a.m. the Germans launched an assault upon Meraviglia from the north-east and were met by some rallied survivors of the Irish Fusiliers who were not easily to be overcome. The struggle continued for well over two hours, and at one time the whole of Fortress Headquarters personnel, including Brigadier Tilney and Captain E. H. B. Baker, Senior Naval Officer, entered the fight with Tommy guns and any weapons that came to hand. At last the ground attack spent itself, but the enemy's air effort was intensified. At eleven o'clock Fortress Headquarters was very heavily bombed. Perhaps as many as 600 sorties were flown by the *Luftwaffe* on this day.

Meanwhile the Buffs—what remained of them—had not been idle. One company, against weak opposition, had advanced along the shore of Alinda Bay, reaching Villa Belleni, now a German hospital containing over fifty paratroopers suffering from broken limbs. Another company had cleared the northern slopes of Rachi leaving only a few pockets of unsubdued Germans; but in this quarter there was now considerable confusion. Parties of the Royal West Kent and King's Own were withdrawing north-westward in the direction of Parteni Bay; Lieutenant-Colonel D. Iggulden of the Buffs rallied these men and put them into position to cover Rachi.

Something else had gone wrong. During the morning part of the Irish Fusiliers received orders, from some source which was never identified, to leave the south and west slopes of Meraviglia for Portolago and did so.

At 2 p.m. Brigadier Tilney, coming from Fortress Headquarters, met Iggulden, with whom was Jellicoe of the S.B.S. The brigadier ordered the Buffs, with all other troops that could be collected, to hold the central Meraviglia sector and bar the way to Portolago, all to be under Iggulden's command.

He then returned to his headquarters, Jellicoe making for the northern part of the island where the patrols of the S.B.S. and the

L.R.D.G. would soon be our only remaining troops except for a few of the Buffs.

During the afternoon Middle East Command received a last message from Brigadier Tilney. It said that the position was desperate—as indeed it was—but that success might yet be won if the German concentration between Alinda Bay and Pandeli Bay (area of Leros town) could be heavily bombarded. This was a vain hope; and whatever dispositions the brigadier might seek to make could be of no avail now. Our men had given their best and had lost heavily in doing so; they were disorganized and utterly exhausted.

Soon after 4 p.m. Fortress Headquarters was again attacked and, after a last despairing struggle, was over-run. Brigadier Tilney was obliged to surrender to General Mueller, commanding the German forces.

A strange interlude followed. The news only became known by degrees to our tired, bewildered and scattered men. Jellicoe who had come south again and was present at the formal surrender found no difficulty in rejoining the S.B.S. and L.R.D.G. in the north, for the enemy could not at once proceed with the occupation of the whole island. Seizing the opportunity to escape Jellicoe gathered together his men, with all their weapons and equipment, and also a few of the Buffs and got them away at half-past four next morning by caique from Parteni Bay, having persuaded the Italians to open the harbour boom. After arriving safely on the Turkish coast the S.B.S. took back launches night after night to pick up such stragglers as could be found on or near the shore. All this they did without any clashes with the enemy.

The Royal Navy had made strenuous efforts to embark troops at Portolago as soon as darkness fell, but few could be collected and put on board the lighters, tugs and launches which had been assembled. Many men lay so exhausted that they were quite unable to gain the quayside. The last party to leave put to sea only twenty minutes before the Germans arrived.

Along the southern coast of Leros other very small parties, chiefly of the L.R.D.G., lay hidden until they were able to embark in such small craft as could be found. The last arrivals reached Turkish soil nearly a fortnight after the surrender.

Of the British troops—four infantry battalions, gunners, signallers, engineers and others who defended Leros—less than 250 escaped, and, if our losses in killed during the five days' fighting be estimated at 600, some 3,000 wounded and unwounded became prisoners of war. We lost, of course, all our 25-pdrs., Bofors guns,



machine guns and mortars and a considerable quantity of equipment and transport. Few of the Italians got away.

Our fighting men, though defeated, were not disgraced; the deciding factor had been the enemy's command of the air. From first to last our twelve Bofors guns claimed sixteen German aircraft, and the German losses in men were by no means negligible. We have it on the authority of an officer of the Royal Canadian Navy that the Italian gunners in the coastal batteries 'fought magnificently'.

The Germans appear to have employed about 4,500 men, of whom 550 were paratroops and 3,600 infantry. Probably not all the infantry were engaged; they were drawn from four different regiments and may have been picked men. Certainly they possessed the fighting quality and discipline of first-class troops. The paratroops, flown from Greece, were young and fit, very well trained and equipped. The artillery which came into action amounted to some twenty field, anti-tank and infantry guns.

The loss of Leros, a bitter disappointment to Mr. Churchill, came as a shock to public opinion at Home, for we had suffered no reverse in the field since the summer of 1942. It marked the end of our Aegean enterprise, for Samos was evacuated without delay. Rhodes remained in the hands of the enemy until the end of the War in Europe.

### Aegean Exit

ON Samos the situation had been by no means an easy one since our arrival in September.<sup>1</sup> The island was no part of the Dodecanese, and the Greek inhabitants who acknowledged Greek sovereignty resented Italian occupation. The Greek irregulars were prepared to resist a German invasion but General Solderelli's Italian division lacked heavy weapons and anti-aircraft armament. Though not unwilling to fight, Solderelli had pointed out that strong British reinforcements were necessary. We could not supply them.

The Blackshirts constituted a distinct liability, for there was no doubt of their German sympathies.

Thus there was no chance of putting Samos, with a coastline of about a hundred miles and many beaches which were suitable for assault landings, into a proper state of defence, although the arrival of the Greek Sacred Squadron at the beginning of November had a good effect upon Greek morale.

With Brigadier R. Baird as military governor and M. Sophoulis,

<sup>1</sup> Map 14.

a former and subsequent Prime Minister of Greece and himself a Samoian, in charge of civil administration, Samos had played its part during October and early November in getting supplies to Leros. The route was mainly through a benevolently neutral Turkey—the ports of Kusadasi and Bodrum actually became small advanced bases—and thence to Samos by caique across the mile-wide channel which separated the island from the coast of Asia Minor. From Samos supplies were forwarded to Leros as opportunity offered by any craft available, sometimes by British destroyer. Vessels slower than destroyers could not make the passage, discharge and return to Samos in a single night.

Almost as soon as Major-General Hall reached his headquarters on Samos he heard that the assault upon Leros had begun. On the night of November 12th came the first appeal for reinforcements, but owing to lack of suitable shipping none could be sent. Later, as we know, General Hall's only British battalion (the 2nd Royal West Kent, less one company already on Leros) was gradually transferred, and supplies of ammunition were run in.

The news of the capitulation of Leros was received in time to stop the Greek Sacred Squadron which had been embarked for transit on the night of the 16th.

It was only too probable that the enemy would lose no time in following up his conquest of Leros by a direct attack upon Samos. On November 17th came a heavy air raid; about noon as many as 110 German aircraft were counted over the island and the buildings of the two principal towns suffered severely although casualties were mercifully few. Middle East Command promptly ordered General Hall and his staff to withdraw—they were brought out by the Navy—and it was left to Brigadier Baird to arrange the evacuation by way of the Turkish coast.

This proved to be a lengthy business. It was conducted with considerable skill, the Germans being deceived as to our points of embarkation. Starting on the night of the 17th seven successive nights were occupied in what may be called the escape. Among the first to leave were M. Sophoulis, General Solderelli and the Metropolitan Archbishop of Samos. All British troops—there were only about 200 of them—were brought away. The German prisoners taken in Leros, the Greek Sacred Squadron, and nearly 8,000 Greek civilians, Greek irregulars, and Italian troops also made the crossing to the mainland without mishap. On the last night, that of November 23rd, after the Germans had landed on Samos, about 500 people crossed 'under their own arrangements'.



We still held on to Castelrosso, eighty miles away from Rhodes to the eastward and close under the Turkish shore. Henceforward our action in the Aegean consisted of such pinpricks as could be inflicted upon the enemy by the S.B.S. Some of Jellicoe's men had made a successful raid on Simi as Leros fell, and they repeated the performance in November.

In war failure always exacts its price, and we had paid heavily enough. The Army's casualties were reckoned to amount in all to 5,046. The task of the Royal Navy so faithfully and valiantly performed, involved the loss of six destroyers sunk by air bomb or mine and six others damaged; four cruisers damaged; one submarine sunk; and four smaller craft sunk and eight damaged. The R.A.F., so often engaged upon unequal terms, reported 100 aircraft of all types destroyed and twenty-five damaged.

We had, of course, taken considerable toll of the enemy. His army losses, including those drowned at sea, were reckoned to amount to 2,550 men. What he lost in artillery and equipment by the sinking of his ships we do not know. Six German naval craft were sunk and two damaged and about 20,000 tons of merchant shipping—large freighters, landing-craft, lighters and caiques—were accounted for by us, mostly by sinking.

The Germans were estimated to have concentrated about 400 aircraft in the Greece-Crete-Aegean area. How many were lost is difficult to judge; the figures reported at the time, 135 destroyed and 126 damaged, are certainly an over-optimistic calculation.

Loss of good battalions, valuable destroyers and aircraft, loss of prestige. What advantage had we to set against these?

We can hardly claim that important enemy forces had been diverted from a major theatre of war. The troops were from regiments in occupation of Greece, with the exception of the parachutist battalion flown in from central Italy; and the total numbers involved were small. The German naval forces were markedly inferior to our own. Only in the air was enemy strength diverted to an appreciable extent, but probably with little effect upon operations elsewhere.

One may, indeed, sympathise with General Wilson who could hardly do otherwise than embark upon the Dodecanese adventure, although compelled to act under circumstances which prejudiced his chances of success from the outset. Had we been ready to pounce upon Rhodes directly the Italian armistice took effect the island might have been ours. It was no fault of the Commander-in-Chief Middle East that we were not ready. The subsequent operations in

the Aegean were initiated at a time when the strength of the probable German reaction was difficult to gauge. When the reaction proved so prompt, bold and vigorous—albeit achieved with an economy of force one cannot but admire—we were in a dilemma. The hope of securing Rhodes faded out. After the loss of Cos even the extrication of our Leros garrison would have been a costly and hazardous operation. The decision to hold Leros was a bold one—perhaps over-bold—since no air cover could be provided; but some of those who fought there still believe that the margin between victory and defeat was very narrow. And if the German assault had been repulsed, what then? We could not pass to the offensive and attack Rhodes without an accession of strength which was denied to the Middle East Command.

This is no place for criticism of Allied strategy as pursued in the fourth year of the War; the issues are too involved and the field too wide. It is easy now to advance the merits of a policy which would have confined the main effort in Europe to the Mediterranean and Balkan theatres, but difficult to do so without over-simplifying the problems which confronted the Allied Governments and commanders at the time. There was no guarantee that the mere conquest of Rhodes would have brought Turkey into the War on our side. It might have been a barren victory unless we had been prepared to follow it up by striking a wider and more powerful blow; and the Allies had never contemplated an advance towards the Danube plain by way of the Aegean Sea and Macedonia.



# GENERAL INDEX

## IRAQ

- Abdulla of Transjordan, 14
- Abu Ghuraib canal, 29
- Air bases in Iraq, 3
  - operations, *see* R.A.F., Royal Navy and German aircraft
  - route to India, 3
- Al Kadhimain, 32, 33
- Ambassador, *see* Sir K. Cornwallis
- American Legation, 11
- Amir Abdul Illah, *see* Regent
- Arab Freedom Movement, 6
- Assyrian levies, 3
- Auchinleck, General Sir C., views on Iraq, 21-2; meets Wavell, 28
- Baghdad Embassy, shelters British subjects, 11; conditions at, 14
  - , Lord Mayor of, 33
  - riots, 35
- Basra, Indian troops land at, 9, 20; action at, 14, 21
- Blomberg, Major Axel von, 23, 27
- Brawn, Lieut.-Colonel J. A., 7
- Casano, Sqdn.-Leader L. V., 24, 31
- Casualties at Habbaniya, 13, 20; at Rutba, 14; total, 36
  - , Iraqi, at Habbaniya, 20; total 36-7
- Churchill, Rt. Hon. W. S., 12
- Clark, Major-General J. G. W., orders to, 16, 22; 24, 28, 34, 36
- Committee of Internal Security, 33
- Cornwallis, Sir Kinahan, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 20, 22, 33, 34
- D'Albiac, Air Vice-Marshal J. D., 26, 34
- Falluja, 10; captured, 26-7; counter-attacked, 27
- Fawzi Quwakji, 24, 36
- Feisal I, King, 3, 4
  - II, King, 4, 6
- Ferguson, Lieut.-Colonel A. H., 29, 32
- Fraser, Major-General W. A. K., 8; orders to, 8; 9, 28
- German aircraft arrive, 21; in action, 22, 25, 28; captured at Mosul, 35; losses, 37
  - High Command, 37
  - terms for aid to Iraq, 37
- Ghazi, King, 4
- Glubb, Major J. B., 16, 25, 34
- 'Golden Square', 5, 17, 33
- Graham, Captain A., 26, 27
- Grobba, Dr., 37
- Habbaniya air base, 3, 4; described, 6; Iraqi forces at, 11; Iraqi demands on, 11; air engagements at, 13; casualties at, 13, 20; fighting at, 17-20
- 'Habforce', orders to, 16, 22; 36
- Haifa-Baghdad road, 4, 14
- Hammond, Lieut.-Colonel N., 14
  - 's Bund, 26, 31
- Hermes*, H.M. carrier, 28
- Hitler directive, 6; 37
- H3, 24
- H4, 14, 15, 16
- Ibn Saud, 14
- India's responsibility for Iraq, 21, 29
- Iraq breaks with Germany, 4; changes Government, 5. *See also* Rashid Ali el Gailani
- 'Iraq Force', 20; arrives at Baghdad, 35
- Iraqi air force, strength of, 7; action at Habbaniya, 20
  - army, strength of, 7; strength around Baghdad, 32; casualties, 36-7
  - navy, strength of, 7
- Italian aircraft in action, 32
- Jamil Madfai, 35
- Japanese action, 5
- Jerusalem, ex-Mufti of, 5, 33
- Khan Nuqta, 31
- 'Kingcol', march to Habbaniya, 24, 28; to Baghdad, 29-33; 35
- Kingstone, Brigadier J. J., 16, 24, 25, 28, 33, 34
- Middle East Command responsibility for Iraq, 21; 37
- Mujara, 25
- Oil supplies, 4
- Pipe-line (oil), 4; Tripoli branch closed, 4; reopened, 10; Haifa branch closed, 10; re-opened, 37
- Powell, Brigadier D., 8, 35



## IRAQ—continued

- Propaganda by Axis, 5  
Pumping stations, 14 (f.n.)  
Quinan, Lieut.-General E. P., 20; orders to, 22, 28; 35  
Ramadi, 25; affair at, 29  
Rashid Ali el Gailani becomes Prime Minister, 5; 6, 9; acts of provocation, 10; hopes for German aid, 10; 11, 14, 17, 21; flees to Persia, 33; 34, 37  
Regent of Iraq, Amir Abdul Illah, 4; flees country, 5; accused, 6; 14; broadcasts to Iraqi people, 17; re-enters Baghdad, 34  
Roberts, Colonel O. L., 12  
R.A.F., action from Habbaniya, 13, 17–20, 22; action from Shaibah, 13, 14, 17, 20; leaflet operations, 17, 27, 35; action against Syrian aerodromes, 22; action at Falluja, 26–7; in advance to Baghdad, 29, 32, 33  
— armoured cars, 7, 20, 31  
— part in campaign, 36  
Royal Navy, aircraft in action, 28  
— part in campaign, 36  
Rutba, 14; occupation of, 24–5
- Saqlawiya, 26  
Shaibah air-base, 3, 4, 6; action from, 13, 14, 17, 20  
Sherif Sharaf, 33  
Sin ad Dhibban, 19, 26, 31  
Slim, Brigadier (Major-General) W. J., 28, 36  
Smart, Air Vice-Marshal H. G., 6, 7, 11, 12, 17, 20; injured, 26  
Syrian assistance to Iraq, 21  
Taji, 32  
Terms to Iraq, 34  
Treaty with Iraq, 3  
Turkey, attitude of, 9; receives Rashid Ali, 33  
Ur (of the Chaldees), 35  
Washash canal bridge, 10, 33, 34  
Waterhouse, Major-General G. G., 9, 10, 13  
Wavell, General Sir A., 3, 8; his views on situation, 15; hopes for negotiation, 21; 22; meets Auchinleck, 28; 29, 31, 37  
Weld, Brigadier C. J., 20

## SYRIA

- Aaqliye, 117  
Abu Kemal, 87, 104, 106, 111  
Achrafie, 98  
Acre, 133, 134  
Ain Matour, 127  
Aiteniye, 63, 66  
Algerian (Vichy) troops, 108, 115, 121  
Allen, Major-General, 109, 116, 125  
Ammunition shortage, 109  
Aouadj river, 77, 89, 99  
Armistice commission, Italian, 42  
Artouz, 93, 95  
Auchinleck, General Sir C., 79, 117, 119  
Baadarane, 127  
Barada gorge, 91, 93, 94, 98, 99, 101  
Beirut, objective, 49; defensive positions south of, 53; entry into, 134  
Beit ed Dine, 116, 121, 127  
Bekaa plain, 53, 115  
Berryman, Brigadier F. N., 81, 83, 108  
Blackburn, Lieut.-Colonel, V.C., 99, 102  
British policy, 42, 43, 44; statement on invasion, 56. *See also* Syria  
Brown, Air Commodore L. O., 133  
Burke, Major, 95, 97, 99  
Casualties, in first week, 78; total, 137; Australian, 137; British and Indian, 137; Free French, 137  
—, Vichy, 137  
Catroux, General, 43, 44, 47, 48, 55–6, 129, 133, 134  
Cazeau, Colonel, 90, 95, 98, 99  
Chasseurs d'Afrique (Vichy), 80, 95  
Chasseurs Libanais (Vichy), 71  
Château, The, 105, 110  
Chebaa, 130  
Chehim, 116  
Churchill, Rt. Hon. W. S., 44, 45, 128  
Civil population, attitude of, 118  
Clark, Major-General J. G. W., 103, 106, 107  
Clarke, Lieut.-Colonel F. D., 113  
—, Major P. T., 113  
Collet, Colonel, joins Free French, 47–8; 75, 77, 88, 100, 136  
Colonial (Vichy) troops, 53, 65, 80, 99, 114, 121, 135

- Counterstroke, Vichy, effects of, 87; reason for, 87  
Cox, Brigadier A. R. B., 51, 58, 75, 82, 108  
Cunningham, Admiral Sir A., 49  
Cutler, Lieut. A. R., 83–4; awarded V.C., 124  
Damascus, 41; objective, 49; defences south of, 53, 75; entry into, 99–100  
Damour river, 53, 116, 117; operations at, 120–7  
Daraya, 125  
Darlan, Admiral, 55  
de Gaulle, General, 43, 44, 45, 87, 129  
Deir ez Zor, 87, 104, 110, 111, 112  
Deir Kanoun, 102, 114  
de Larminat, Colonel, 42  
Dentz, General, 44; controlled by Vichy Government, 46, 47; 47, 53, 54, 71  
99; refuses to parley, 117, 127, 128; consents, 128, 129; his bad faith, 129, 134–5; interned, 134; released, 135  
Deraa, 59  
de Verdilhac, General, 47, 48, 53, 54, 55, 86–7, 133  
Dimmas, 114, 130  
'Doncol', 56–7  
'Duck's Bill', 87, 112, 128  
El Aatiqa, 120, 121, 127  
El Boum, 121, 125  
Engert, Mr. (U.S. Consul-General), 127, 129  
Es Soyar, 117  
Evetts, Major-General J. F., 101, 102, 114, 115, 130, 131, 134  
Ezraa, 75; lost, 85; recovered, 86; 91  
Fawzi Qawukji, 104, 107, 128  
Fiq, 52, 59, 84  
Fleet Air Arm. *See* Royal Navy  
Foreign Legion (F.F.), 77  
— (Vichy), 53, 67, 84, 105, 106, 109, 110, 111, 115, 121, 135  
Forts at Barada gorge, 93, 94, 97, 98, 99  
Free French, desire for action, 42, 43, 44; proclamation, 55–6  
— forces available, 44, 49; rôle, 52; first advance, 60; advance on Damascus, 75; before Kissoué, 77; at Kissoué, 90; at Damascus, 98–100; advance beyond Damascus, 100; casualties, 137  
French (Vichy) officers, temper of, 53, 54, 62, 78  
F.V.—17  
Frontier crossed, 56  
Furqlus, 111, 128  
Galloway, Brigadier A., 115  
Génin, Colonel, 86  
German aircraft, use Syrian airfields, 43, 46, 47; in action, 78; bomb Haifa, 118; bomb Beirut, 134  
— invasion of Russia, 100, 138  
Germany, attitude of, 42; action at invasion, 54, 61, 136  
Glengyle, H.M.S., 57, 63  
Gordon, Capt. R. R., 85  
—, Pte. J. H., awarded V.C., 127  
Goru Ram, Havildar, 59  
Greatwood, Lieut.-Colonel H. E., 98  
'Habforce', 79, 103, 106, 109, 111, 113, 119, 132  
Hackett, Major, 86  
Haifa, air raids on, 118  
Hasbani, 115  
Hasbaya, 73, 115  
Hassech, 128  
Hitler's preoccupations, 61, 86–7  
*Hotspur*, H.M. destroyer, 69  
Hula, Lake, 80  
Huntziger, General, 46  
H3, 103, 105, 106, 109  
H4, 109  
Ibeles Saki, 73; lost, 80; recovered, 108  
Indo-Chinese (Vichy) troops, 48  
Irak revolt, effect of, 43  
*Isis*, H.M. destroyer, 69, 70  
Iskanderun, 56  
Italian action at invasion, 61  
— armistice commission, 42  
Jeannequin, General, 134  
Jebel Badrane, 77  
— Chaia, 102  
— Habil, 130, 131  
— Hachine, 97, 101  
— Kelb, 90, 91, 95, 98  
— Maani, 77, 89  
— Madani, 91, 93, 94, 95  
— Mazar, 101, 102; operations against, 113–5, 130–2  
Jezzine, 74, 75; operations at, 82–3, 108, 116  
Jisr Bennett Yacoub, 52, 60, 80, 85  
Jones, Lieut.-Colonel L. B., 77, 93, 94, 98  
Kadem, 99  
Kafr Houn, 74



SYRIA—*continued*

Kafr Sous, 94, 95, 97  
 Kameshli, 128  
*Kandahar*, H.M. destroyer, 69  
 Katana, 93, 101  
 'Kelly's Gang', 81  
 Keyes, Major G. C. T., 63, 64, 65  
 Khabur river, 113  
 Khalde, 132  
 Khiam, 53, 58, 71, 73; lost, 80; 81; recovered, 107  
 Khirbe, 58, 73  
*Kimberley*, H.M. destroyer, 70  
 King, Rear-Admiral E. L. S., 68  
 'Kingcol', 103, 105, 111  
 Kingstone, Brigadier J. J., 103, 106, 107  
 Kissoué, 53; operations approaching, 77; 88; operations at, 89-91  
 Kuneitra, 52, 60, 75, 81; lost, 84; 85; recovered, 86; 88, 91  
 Lamb, Lieut.-Colonel D. J., 99  
 Lampson, Sir Miles, 56  
 Lavarack, Major-General J. D., 48, 51, 73, 80, 81, 100, 101, 108, 134  
 Legentilhomme, General, 44, 52, 75, 77; wounded, 77; 78, 87, 88, 91, 94, 100, 101  
 Levant, Army of the, 42  
 — (Vichy) infantry, 112  
 Light Desert companies, 105, 110, 112  
 Litani river, 51, 52, 53, 57, 58; operations at, 63-6  
 Lloyd, Brigadier W. L., 52, 77, 87, 89, 90, 91, 94, 96, 98  
 Lomax, Brigadier C. E. N., 100, 114, 115  
  
 Macdonald, Lieut.-Colonel A. B., 56  
 Machrhara, 82  
 Mademie, 93, 94  
 'Mad Mile', 82  
 Merjayoun, 53, 58, 71, 73, 75; lost, 80; 81, 82, 83-4; recovered, 107-8; 130  
 Merry, Major, 104  
 Mezze aerodrome, 49, 78, 91, 94  
 — House, 95, 96, 97-8  
 —, operations round, 91-9  
 Miye ou Miye, 69, 70  
 Monaghan, Lieut.-Colonel R. F., 75, 80  
 More, Captain G. R. M. H., 63, 65, 66  
 Moroccan (Vichy) troops, 77, 114  
 Morse, Captain A. J. V., R.N., 133  
 Murray, Captain A., 59  
  
 Nabatiye, 73, 75  
 Nassib, 59  
 Naoua, 60

Nichols, Lieut.-Colonel, 110  
 Nusaybin, 79  
  
 Oleaa, 73, 80, 81  
 Orr, Lieut.-Colonel A. D. G., 84  
  
 Palmyra, 87; operations at, 103-7, 109-11  
*Parthian*, H.M. submarine, 137  
 Peaceful overtures, 54, 55, 58, 59, 60, 61, 136  
 Pedder, Lieut.-Colonel R. N. R., 52, 57, 63, 65  
*Pegasus*, tanker, 129  
 Pétain, Marshal. *See* Vichy Government  
*Phoebe*, H. M. cruiser, 68  
 Picturesque campaign, 135  
 Plant, Brigadier, 108, 116, 121, 127  
 Polish brigade, 42  
  
 Rachaya, 81  
 Raqqa, 112, 128  
 Ras el Ain, 128  
 Rawling, Rear-Admiral H. B., 121  
 Rayak, objective, 49; 53  
 Reinforcements, lack of, 68  
 Rharife, 108, 116, 121  
 R.A.F., attack airfields, 43, 47, 60, 77, 128; strategy, 49, 118; bomb battery positions, 77; bomb transport, 98, 99, 108; attack Palmyra, 109; support Indian troops, 112; support Damour operations, 121, 123; part in campaign, 137  
 R.A.A.F. operations, 86, 107, 109, 123, 127  
 Royal Navy, rôle of, 49, 52; operations, 61, 68, 70, 71, 78, 117, 118, 121, 123, 125, 137; losses, 61, 137; part in campaign, 137  
 Russia, invasion of, 100, 138  
  
 Sab Biyar, 109  
 Sanamein, 85  
 Savige, Brigadier S. G., 116, 127  
 Senegalese (F.F.) troops, 77, 86, 89  
 — (Vichy) troops, 48, 53, 82, 114, 121  
 Sheikh Meskine, 59, 60, 75, 85  
 Sidon, defences of, 53; operations at, 63-71  
 Slim, Major-General W. J., 128  
*Souffleur*, Vichy submarine, 137  
 Spahis (F.F.), 59  
 — (Vichy), 57, 80, 90-1

Stevens, Brigadier J. E. S., 52, 69, 127  
*Stuart*, H.M.A. destroyer, 69  
 Sukhne, 110, 113  
 Surprise, no chance of, 54, 55  
 Syria, status of, 41; change after French collapse, 42; British policy regarding, 42, 43, 44; justification for occupying, 136; our handicaps, 137; our achievement, 137  
  
 Tanks, Vichy, 67-8  
 Tedder, Air Marshal A., 49  
 Tel Aalo, 128  
 — Chehab, 59  
 — Kissoué, 90  
 — Kotchek, 79, 87, 113  
 Terms to Syria, 133-4  
 Tiarks, Brigadier J. G. E., 111  
 Tiberias (Sea of Galilee), 59  
 Tibnine, 57  
 'Todcol' ('Todforce'), 71, 73  
 Todd, Lieut.-Colonel G. H. N., 71  
*Troupes spéciales*, 48, 53, 113  
 Tunisian (Vichy) troops, 48, 85, 86, 115, 121  
 Turkey, attitude of, 46; prevents Vichy reinforcement, 118; 138  
 Tyre, 56, 57  
 T2, 106  
 T3, 106, 107, 111  
  
 Vichy air attacks, 68, 69, 75, 78, 83, 106, 107, 111, 112, 132

Vichy air reinforcements, 118  
 — casualties, 137  
 — counterstroke, purpose of, 87  
 — forces, strength of, 53; temper of, 53, 61, 118  
 — Government, policy in Syria, 42; consult Dentz, 46; orders to Dentz, 47; announcements on Syria, 54, 55, 61-2; justify asking for terms, 129  
 — naval action, 64  
 — tanks in action, 67, 68, 69, 70, 81, 83, 84, 89, 95-6  
 von Hentig, 42  
  
 Watch dogs, 123, 135  
 Wavell, General Sir A., his views on Syria, 42, 44, 45, 46; selects forces for campaign, 48; instructions to Wilson, 49; views on prospects, 53, 55, 78; orders reinforcements, 79; 103, 108; reports, 117, 118, 129, 137  
 Weld, Brigadier C. J., 111, 112  
 Wilson, Lieut.-General Sir H. M., 49; his plan of campaign, 51; 53; reports on first day, 61; 73, 77, 99, 106, 107, 118, 119, 132-3, 134, 137  
 Wright, Colonel P. L. M., 85, 86  
  
 Yafour, 102  
 Yellow Ridge, 105, 106, 109, 110

## PERSIA

Abadan, oilfields, 143; refinery, 146; refinery occupied, 149-51; Island cleared, 152  
 Ahwaz, capitulation of, 153  
 Airborne operation, 151  
 Aizlewood, Brigadier J. A., 147, 153  
 Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, 146, 149, 152, 156  
 Armoured cars, Persian, 151  
  
 Bandar Shahpur, 143, 146; captured, 151-2  
 Bay Endor, Admiral, 150  
 British interests in Persia, 141; accord with Russia, 143  
 Bullard, Sir Reader, British Ambassador, 158  
 Bushire, 143  
  
 Casualties in South Persia, 153

Casualties, Persian, at Khorramshahr, 150; at Qasr Shaikh, 151; at Abadan, 153  
  
 Eden, Rt. Hon. A., 144  
 'Eurekas', 148  
  
*Falmouth*, H.M.S., 150  
  
 German penetration and influence, 142, 144; military intervention impossible, 158; departures from Persia, 160  
 Gilan, 147; check at, 155  
 Goebbels, Dr., 158  
  
 Haft Khel, 146; occupied, 151  
 Hamadan occupied, 156  
 Harvey, Major-General C. O., 146, 150, 153, 157  
*Hehenfels*, German s.s., 151



PERSIA—*continued*

- Indian Army achievement, 160  
 'Iraq Force', 146, 147, 160
- Joyce, William, 158
- Kanimbla*, A.M.C., 151  
 Karind, 155  
 Karun river, 150, 153  
 Kermanshah occupied, 156  
 Khorramshahr occupied, 150  
 Khusawi occupied, 154  
 'Kingcol', 146, 147  
 Kurdistan, unrest in, 158
- Le Fleming, Brigadier R. E., 146  
 Lochner, Brigadier R. G., 146
- Mayer, Franz, 144  
 Mountain, Brigadier R. G., 146  
 Muhammad Riza Pahlevi (Crown Prince) succeeds father, 160  
 Muhammad Shahbakhti, General, 153  
 Muquadam, General, 156
- Naft Shah, 143, 147; occupied, 154  
 Novikov, General, 145
- Oil supplies, importance of, 141
- 'Paiforce', 160, 161  
 Pai Tak Pass, 145, 147; advance on, 155; bombed, 155; abandoned by Persians, 155  
 Persia, necessity for action against, 141; German interest in, 141, 142; German penetration and influence, 142, 144. *See also* Shah  
 Persian air force, mutiny of officers, 159  
 ——— army, state of, 148  
 Plans for advance, British, 145  
 ———, Russian, 145–6  
 Pocock, Colonel J. G., 156, 157
- Qasr-i-Shirin, 147; occupied, 154  
 Qasr Shaikh, 146, 150; captured, 151  
 Quinan, Lieut.-General E. P., orders to, 143; 146
- Ridley, Lieut.-Colonel E. R., 149  
 Riza Khan Pahlevi, *see* Shah of Persia  
 R.A.F., operations at Ahwaz, 153; operations at Pai Tak Pass, 155; leaflet operations, 157  
 Royal Navy, part in S. Persia operations, 148–9, 150, 151, 152, 153  
 Russia, involvement of, 141; transportation of supplies to, 142–3; plan for advance into Persia, 145  
 Russian advance, 157  
 Russians met at Sinneh, 157
- Sar-i-Pul Zuhab occupied, 154  
 Schultz, Berthold, 144  
 Shah of Persia, 142; receives Anglo-Russian representations, 143, 144; his policy of delay, 144; addresses cadets, 144; orders hostilities to cease, 153, 156, 158; abdicates, 160  
 Shahabad, 147; entered, 155  
*Shoreham*, H.M.S., 149  
 Sinneh, Russians at, 156; British arrive at, 157  
 Slim, Major-General W. J., 146, 147, 153, 155, 156, 157  
 Smirnov, M., Russian Ambassador, 158
- Teheran, situation in, 159; Allies enter, 160  
 Terms for Persia, 158  
 Tiarks, Brigadier J. G. E., 147  
 'Tourists', German, 143, 152  
 Trans-Iranian railway, 143, 161  
 Turkey, attitude of, 158
- von Ettel, German Ambassador, 159, 160
- Wavell, General Sir A., consults Russian commander, 159; 160  
 Weld, Brigadier C. J., 147
- Yarra*, H.M.A.S., 150
- Zibiri, capitulation at, 156

## MADAGASCAR

- Alakamisy, 206  
 Ambalavao, 206, 207  
 Ambanja, 200  
 Ambararata, 171, 174, 176  
 Ambodi Vahibe Bay, diversion at, 173, 176
- Ambositra, 206  
 Anamakia, 177  
 Andohazampo Cove, 176  
 Andrakaka isthmus, 175  
 Andriba, 197  
 Ankazoba, 197–8

- Annet, M., Governor-General, 177, 186, 189, 190, 191, 199, 206, 207  
 Ano Bozaka, 182, 183  
 Antalaha, 201  
 Antanambao, 186  
*Anthony*, H.M. destroyer, 182, 183–4, 185, 187  
 Antsirabe, 204, 205  
 Antsirane, 171, 177; defences south of, 177–8; Marines landing at, 182, 183–5; captured, 185, 186
- Bachaquero*, s.s., 168  
 Basse Point, 176  
 Batteries, coastal, 169, 171, 174, 183, 184  
 Beach, Blue, 171, 176, 179  
 ———, Green, 171, 176  
 ———, Red (Majunga), 193  
 ———, White, 171, 176  
 Beaches, Red, 174, 175  
 ———, work at the, 179–81, 195  
 Bellevue Fort, 178, 182, 183, 185, 186  
 Beramanja, 188, 200, 201  
 Betsiboka, bridge, 195, 196–7; river, 193  
*Birmingham*, H.M. cruiser, 191, 202, 205  
*Blackmore*, H.M. destroyer, 193  
 Brickaville, 191; occupied, 203; 204
- Caimans Fort, 178, 185, 186  
 Cape Town, arrival at, 169  
 Capitulation, 207  
 Casualties at Diego Suarez, 187  
 ———, total, 207  
 ———, Vichy, at Diego Suarez, 187  
 Churchill, Rt. Hon. W. S., 168, 169  
 Claerbout, Colonel, 186  
 Col de Bonne Nouvelle, 178, 183  
 Col du Courier, 175  
 Courier Bay, 171, 174, 179
- Delay to expedition, 167  
*D'Entrecasteux*, Vichy sloop, 176  
*Devonshire*, H.M. cruiser, 168  
 Diego Suarez, situation of, 166; its port and harbour, 166–7; British decision to occupy, 167; description of, 171; plan of attack, 171; village occupied, 175  
 Dimoline, Brigadier W. A., 189, 198, 206  
 Durban, preparations at, 170, 173; departure from, 173
- Festing, Brigadier F. W., 167, 178, 179, 181, 183, 186, 194, 202, 203  
 Fianarantsoa, 199; airfield, 205; occupied, 206  
 Fleet Air Arm, *see* Royal Navy  
 17\*
- 'Force 121', 167, 168, 169  
 Freetown rendez-vous, 168
- Getcliffe, Lieut.-Colonel N. B., 200, 201
- Heemskerck*, Dutch cruiser, 193  
 Hellville, 200  
*Hermione*, H.M. cruiser, 168, 173, 176  
 Hodges, Lieut.-Cdr., 183
- Ihosi, airfield, 205; 206, 207  
*Illustrious*, H.M. carrier, 168, 176, 193  
*Indomitable*, H.M. carrier, 168, 176
- Jangoa, 201  
 Japan, 165; at war, 166; threatens our sea routes, 166; progress in Far East, 167  
 Japanese submarine attack, 189  
 Joubert, Trooper, 205
- Kamoro bridge, 195
- Laforey*, H.M. destroyer, 176  
 Laval, M., 174  
 Legentilhomme, General, 207  
*Lightning*, H.M. destroyer, 186  
 Lush, Brigadier M.S., 198
- Machefaux, Commandant, 205  
 Madagascar, importance of, 166  
 Maerten, Captain de V., 186  
 Maevatanana, 197  
 Mahitsi, 198  
 Majunga, 170, 188, 191; occupation of, 193–4; 199  
 Malaria, 207  
 Malgache soldiery, 169, 175, 183, 197, 198, 200, 202, 203, 206  
 Mangoky, 176, 177  
*Manxman*, H.M. minelayer, 200  
 Maromandia, 200, 201  
 Martin, Commandant, 194  
 Mayotte island, 190  
 Melville, Colonel S. A., 190 (f. n.)  
 Moramanga, 203  
 Morondava, 196  
 Mosquitos, 195, 197, 200, 207  
 Mozambique Channel, 166, 174, 189, 193
- Napier*, H.M.A. destroyer, 196  
 Nosy Be, 200  
 Nosy Mitsio, 200
- 'Operation Ironclad', 169, 170, 176  
 '——— Jane', 191, 202



MADAGASCAR—*continued*

'Operation Line', 191  
 'Stream', 191  
 Orangea headland, 171, 176; surrender at, 186  
 Parachutists, dummy, 173, 176-7  
 Platt, Lieut.-General Sir W., 189, 190, 195, 199, 204, 207  
 Powell, Lieut. H. J., 185  
 Price, Captain M., 183, 185  
 Pryce-Bayley, 2nd-Lieut., 203  
*Ramillies*, H.M. battleship, 168, 174, 182, 186, 188; torpedoed, 189  
 Royal Air Force, 190 (f.n.)  
 — Marines, at Antsirane, 182, 183-5; at Hellville, 200  
 — Navy, aircraft leaflet operations, 171; operations at landings, 174-5, 187, 193, 202; aircraft attacks, 176, 181, 187, 193, 205; Antsirane landing party, 182, 183-5, 187  
 Russell, Brigadier V. C., 169  
 Sahamalaza Bay, 201  
 Sahambava, 201  
 Sambaina, 204  
 Secrecy precautions, 168, 169, 173, 191  
 Senescall, Brigadier G. T., 189  
 Senegalese (Vichy) troops, 176, 186, 196, 197

## DODECANESE

*Adrias*, Greek destroyer, 228  
 Aegean offensive, question of, 214, 227, 242  
 Air attacks, German, on shipping, 218; on Antimachia, 219; at invasion of Cos, 221-5; on Leros, 226, 228; on Castelrosso, 228; at invasion of Leros, 232-8; on Samos, 241  
 Aircraft, German, losses at Leros, 240; total losses, 242  
 Alinda Bay, 231, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239  
 Anderson, Lieut.-General Sir D., 220; orders to, 226; 227, 229  
 Antimachia airfield, 217, 218, 221  
 Arakan, 214  
 Armistice, Italian, 214  
 Asfendiu, 224  
*Aurora*, H.M. cruiser, 228  
 Seymour, Sergt. A. R., 205  
 Smuts, General, 169-70, 189  
 Somerville, Admiral J. F., 190  
 South African Air Force, 199, 205  
 Stockwell, Lieut.-Colonel H. C., 186  
 Sturges, Major-General R. G., 167, 169, 170, 173, 181, 182, 183, 186, 188, 190  
 Syfret, Rear-Admiral E. N., 168, 170, 171, 173, 174, 175, 181, 182, 185, 186  
 Tamatave, 170, 188, 191, 199; occupied, 202-3  
 Tananarive, 190, 191, 196; occupied, 198-9; ceremony at, 204  
 Tanks in action, 178-9  
 Tarleton, Brigadier G. W. B., 168, 179, 181, 185  
 Tennant, Rear-Admiral W. G., 190, 191  
 Tulear, 205, 207  
 Vichy air force, end of, 205  
 — forces, strength of, 169  
 Vohemar, 201  
 Vos, Major, 198  
*Warspite*, H.M. battleship, 202  
 'Windsor Castle', 174, 175  
 'Zulus', 197

Vichy air force, end of, 205  
 — forces, strength of, 169  
 Vohemar, 201  
 Vos, Major, 198

*Warspite*, H.M. battleship, 202  
 'Windsor Castle', 174, 175

'Zulus', 197

Baird, Brigadier R., 240, 241  
 Baker, Captain T. H. B., R.N., 238  
*Belvoir*, H.M. destroyer, 228  
 Bodrum, 241  
 Brittorous, Major-General F. G., 227, 229  
 Calchi, 218  
 Calino, 218, 225, 233  
 Camare Bay, 223  
 Campioni, Admiral, 215  
 Capa Foca, 221  
 Cappari, 225  
 Cardamena, 223  
 Caso Strait, 221  
 Castello di Bronzi, 235  
 Castelrosso, 213, 215; occupied, 217; 220, 228; air raid on, 228; 242  
 Castle Hill, 233, 235

Casualties, on Cos, 224; at Levita, 229; on Leros, 239; total in Aegean, 242  
 — German, in convoy attack, 226; at Simi, 227; total in Aegean, 242  
 Cefalo, 221  
 Central Mediterranean Force, 214, 219  
 Churchill, Rt. Hon. W. S., 214, 215, 227, 240  
 Conference near Tunis, 227  
 Cos, 211, 216; occupied, 217, 218, 219; 220; harbour, 221; invasion and loss of, 221-5; 233  
 Crete, 217  
 Cunningham, Admiral Sir A., 227  
 Cyclades, 218, 219, 228  
 Cyprus air bases, 216, 220  
 Dodecanese, 211; importance of, 212  
 Easonsmith, Lieut.-Colonel, 237  
*Echo*, H.M. destroyer, 237  
*Eclipse*, H.M. destroyer, 228  
 Eden, Rt. Hon. A., 231  
 Eisenhower, General, 214, 219, 227  
*Euro*, Italian destroyer, 226

'Force 292', 220, 225, 229  
 French, Lieut.-Colonel M., 235, 236

German strength, at Cos, 225; at Leros, 240  
 Germano, 233  
 Gherme, 221, 224  
 Giaros, 218  
 Greek troops on Samos, 218, 229, 240, 241  
 Grifo Bay, 233  
 Gurna Bay, 231, 232, 233

Hall, Major-General H. R., 229, 231, 241  
*Hurworth*, H.M. destroyer, 228

Iggulden, Lieut.-Colonel D., 238  
*Intrepid*, H.M. destroyer, 218  
 Italians, on Rhodes, 215; on Cos, 217; on Samos, 217, 240; on Simi, 218; at invasion of Cos, 223, 224; at Simi attack, 227; on Leros, 232; at invasion of Leros, 233, 235, 236, 240

Jellicoe, Major Lord, 215, 216, 238, 239

Kenyon, Colonel L. F. R., 224, 225  
 Kirby, Lieut.-Colonel R. F., 224  
 Kithnos, 218, 226, 229  
 Kusadasi, 241

Lavrion, 232  
 Leros, 211, 216; occupied, 218, 219; 220, 225, 227, 228, 229, 231; described, 231; defence plan, 232; invasion and loss of 233-40  
 — town, 232, 233, 237, 238, 239  
 Levita, 229

Marmari, 221  
 Middle East Command, rôle of, 214; policy of penetration, 216; plan for Rhodes attack, 219; orders, 226; 229, 239, 241  
 Milos, 228  
 Mount Appetici, 233, 235, 236, 237  
 — Clidi, 233, 235, 236  
 — Condrida, 234  
 — Marcello, 232  
 — Meraviglia, 232, 233, 235, 238  
 — Scumbarda, 236  
 — Simpetro, 224  
 — Vedetta, 233, 236, 237  
 — Zuncona, 232  
 Mueller, General, 239  
 Mykonos, 228

Naxos, 221, 228  
 New Zealanders (L.R.D.G.), 218, 228-9, 234  
 Nisiro, 218

'Operation Accolade', 219, 227

Palma Bay, 233  
 Pandeli Bay, 233, 239  
*Panther*, H.M. destroyer, 228  
 Parachute, supplies by, 228  
 Parachutists, at Cos, 217, 223  
 — German, at Cos, 223; at Leros, 234, 235  
 Paros, 6  
 Parteni Bay, 238, 239  
 Pasta di Sopra Point, 233  
*Penelope*, H.M. cruiser, 228  
*Petard*, H.M. destroyer, 228  
 Piscopi, 218  
 Point Bianca, 233  
 Portolago, 218, 228, 232, 237, 238  
 — Bay, 232

*Queen Olga*, Greek destroyer, 218

Rachi ridge (spur), 234, 235, 236, 237, 238  
 Retrospect, 242



DODECANESE—*continued*

- Rhodes, importance of, 211, 216; plans for attack on, 213, 214, 216, 219; garrison, 214; failure of mission to, 215; sabotage on, 217; 218, 227; attack deferred, 227
- Rhodesians (L.R.D.G.), 218
- Royal Air Force, at Cos, 217, 225; offensive against Greek and Cretan airfields, 227; at Leros, 237; losses, 242
- Navy, operations of, 220, 226, 227, 228, 235, 237, 239; losses, 242
- Rome before Rhodes, 227
- Samos, 216; occupied, 217, 218, 219; 220, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 231, 235; reinforces Leros, 237, 241; evacuation of, 241
- , Metropolitan Archbishop of, 241
- S. Giovanni, 235
- S. Quirico, 235, 236
- Scarpanto, 211, 213, 214, 216, 218
- Seriphos, 229
- Simi, occupied, 218, 219; German attack on, 226; raided, 242
- Sirius*, H.M. cruiser, 228
- Solderelli, General, 217, 240, 241
- Sophoulis, M., 240, 241
- Stampalia, 218, 226
- Syros, 228
- Tilney, Brigadier R., 231, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239
- Turkey, a potential ally, 214; a friendly neutral, 220, 241; 227, 229, 231
- Villa Bellini, 235, 236, 237, 238
- Wavell, General Sir A., 213
- Wilson, General Sir H. M., prepares to attack Rhodes, 214, 215; plans Aegean offensive, 216; 220, 242

INDEX TO FORMATIONS  
AND UNITS

## IRAQ

- Divisions—  
1st Cavalry, 15  
10th Indian, 8, 28, 36
- Brigades—  
4th Cavalry, 16  
20th Indian, 8, 14  
21st ———, 20
- Regiments—  
Household Cavalry, 16, 24, 28, 29, 31, 33, 35, 36  
Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, 16  
Warwickshire Yeomanry, 16
- Essex, 1st Bn., 16, 22, 26, 28, 31, 32  
King's Own Royal (Lancaster), 1st Bn., 8, 11, 19, 26, 27
- 13th Lancers, 20
- 11th Sikhs, 2nd Bn., 8  
13th Frontier Force Rifles, 4th Bn., 20
- 4th Gurkha Rifles, 2nd Bn., 20, 26, 35  
7th ———, 2nd Bn., 8  
8th ———, 2nd Bn., 8  
10th ———, 2nd Bn., 20
- 3rd Field Regt. R.A., 8  
60th ——— R.A., 16, 22  
1st Indian Anti-tank Bty., 8
- 2nd Cheshire Field Sqdn. R.E., 16  
10th Field Coy., Sappers & Miners, 8  
41st Indian Field Park Coy., 8
- Arab Legion, 16, 25, 29, 31  
Assyrian Bn., 6, 12, 19, 20, 26, 27  
Transjordan Frontier Force, 16
- R.A.F.—  
No. 244 Bomber Sqdn., 6, 14, 28  
No. 4 Service Flying Training School, 6; composition of, 7  
No. 2 Armoured Car Coy., 24

## SYRIA

- Corps—  
I Australian, 100, 116
- Divisions—  
6th, 49, 100, 101, 115, 116, 119  
2nd Armoured, 49  
7th ———, 49  
1st Cavalry, 46, 49, 131  
7th Australian, 48, 49, 51, 57, 85, 107, 116, 119, 121, 127  
9th ———, 49  
4th Indian, 48  
10th ———, 103, 111
- Brigades—  
14th, 131  
16th, 85, 100, 101, 107, 114, 115, 116, 131  
23rd, 115, 116, 130  
4th Cavalry, 103, 111  
17th Australian, 116, 121, 125, 126, 127
- 21st Australian, 52, 57, 66, 68, 73, 75, 83, 107, 121, 126, 127  
25th ———, 51, 58, 71, 73, 116, 121, 127  
5th Indian, 48, 52, 58, 75, 77, 101, 119, 131  
17th ———, 112, 113  
20th ———, 111, 113  
21st ———, 111, 121
- Regiments—  
Household Cavalry, 103, 104, 106, 107, 109, 128  
Royal Dragoons, 49, 84  
Scots Greys, 71, 75, 80, 81  
Cheshire Yeomanry, 56, 57, 58, 73, 82, 117, 134  
North Somerset Yeomanry, 131  
Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, 103, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110  
Staffordshire Yeomanry, 71, 75  
Warwickshire Yeomanry, 103, 105, 106, 107



## SYRIA—continued

- Yorkshire Dragoons, 85
- Border Regt., 4th Bn., 115, 130  
Durham Light Infantry, 1st Bn., 115, 130  
Essex, 1st Bn., 106, 109, 110  
King's Own Royal (Lancaster), 2nd Bn., 101, 108, 115, 130, 131  
Leicestershire, 2nd Bn., 101, 102, 113, 114, 130, 131  
Queen's Royal (West Surrey), 2nd Bn., 85, 86, 93, 101, 102, 113, 114, 130, 131  
Royal Fusiliers, 1st Bn., 52, 60, 75, 84, 86, 95, 131
- 6th Australian Cavalry, 49, 67, 73, 81, 108, 134  
9th ———, 80, 109, 130–1
- 2/3rd Australian Bn., 97, 98, 99, 101, 102, 113, 114, 115, 116, 125, 126  
2/5th ———, 75, 80, 81, 101, 116, 125, 126  
2/14th ———, 56, 83, 108, 117, 121, 124, 125, 127  
2/16th ———, 56, 64, 66, 68, 69, 121, 124, 125, 127, 134  
2/25th ———, 73, 81, 82, 83, 107, 116  
2/27th ———, 66, 67, 69, 70, 117, 121, 124, 125, 126  
2/31st ———, 58, 73, 82, 83, 108, 127  
2/33rd ———, 58, 71, 73, 75, 80, 81, 107, 117
- 2/3rd Australian Machine-Gun Bn., 80, 81, 85, 98, 99, 101  
2/2nd ——— Pioneer Bn., 81, 108, 115, 116, 125, 127  
13th Lancers, 111, 112  
1st Punjab, 3rd Bn., 59, 89, 91, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97  
6th Rajputana Rifles, 4th Bn., 59, 89, 91, 93, 94, 95, 96  
12th Frontier Force, 1st Bn., 113  
13th ——— Rifles, 4th Bn., 111, 112  
4th Gurkha Rifles, 2nd Bn., 111, 112  
8th ———, 2nd Bn., 113  
10th ———, 2nd Bn., 111
- 1st Field Regt. R.A., 59, 95  
4th ——— R.A., 114  
157th ——— R.A., 111  
9th Australian Field Bty., 52  
5th ——— Anti-Tank Bty., 80  
9th Field Coy., Sappers & Miners, 111  
Commando (C. Bn. Special Service Bde.), 49, 52, 57, 63–6  
Arab Legion, 103, 105, 109, 110, 113  
Czechoslovak Bn., 115, 130  
Transjordan Frontier Force, 59, 85, 86  
Free French—  
Brigades, 86, 90, 95, 98, 99  
Foreign Legion Bn., 77  
*Groupement Collet*, 52, 59–60, 75, 89, 90, 99, 100  
Marine Bn., 93, 95, 115, 130, 131, 134

## PERSIA

- Divisions—  
8th Indian, 146  
10th ———, 146
- Brigades—  
9th Armoured, 147, 155, 159  
2nd Indian Armoured, 146, 147, 154  
17th ———, 147  
18th ———, 146, 150, 153  
20th ———, 147  
21st ———, 147, 155, 159  
24th ———, 146, 152  
25th ———, 146, 150, 153
- Regiments—  
14th/20th Hussars, 147, 154, 155  
Warwickshire Yeomanry, 147, 154, 155, 156  
10th Guides Cavalry, 146, 147, 150  
13th Lancers, 146, 147, 150, 151, 153  
5th Mahratta Light Infantry, 1st Bn., 146; 5th Bn., 146, 150  
6th Rajputana Rifles, 2nd Bn., 146, 148, 149, 150  
10th Baluch Regt., 3rd Bn., 146, 150, 151, 152

- 11th Sikh Regt., 2nd Bn., 146, 151  
Kumaon Rifles, 1st Bn., 146, 148, 149, 150  
2nd Gurkha Rifles, 1st Bn., 146  
3rd ———, 2nd Bn., 146
- 5th Gurkha Rifles, 1st Bn., 147, 154, 156  
7th ———, 2nd Bn., 147, 154  
15th Field Regt. R.A., 156

## MADAGASCAR

- Division—  
5th, 168, 169, 170, 189
- Brigades—  
13th, 169, 170, 188  
17th, 168, 170, 179, 182, 185, 186, 189  
29th Independent, 167, 168, 171, 176, 178–9, 181, 183, 191, 193, 194, 199, 202, 203, 207, 208  
7th South African, 189, 190, 191  
22nd East African, 189, 191, 193, 194, 195, 199, 204, 205, 207  
27th (N. Rhodesia), 191
- Regiments—  
East Lancashire, 2nd Bn., 171, 175, 176, 181, 193, 194  
Northamptonshire, 2nd Bn., 185  
Royal Scots Fusiliers, 1st Bn., 176, 177, 179, 181; 2nd Bn., 185  
Royal Welch Fusiliers, 2nd Bn., 176, 177, 178, 179, 185, 190, 193, 194, 203  
Seaforth Highlanders, 6th Bn., 185  
South Lancashire, 2nd Bn., 179, 181, 182–3, 194, 203
- First City, 189, 200  
Pretoria Highlanders, 189, 200
- The Pretoria Regt., 189, 201, 205, 207
- King's African Rifles, 1/1st (Nyasa-land) Bn., 195, 196–8; 5th (Kenya) Bn., 201, 205, 206 (1/6th (Tangan-yika) Bn., 204, 206
- 9th Field Regt. R.A., 179, 183, 206; 20th Bty., 206  
455th Light Bty. R.A., 168, 181, 183  
145th Light A.A. Troop R.A., 168  
6th South African Field Regt., 189, 197; 16th Bty., 200, 201  
56th (Uganda) Bty. East African Artillery, 206
- Tank Special Service Sqdn., 168  
A. Sqdn. 1st South African Armoured Car Commando, 189, 191, 195, 196–9, 204, 205, 207
- 236th Field Coy. R.E., 203  
88th South African Field Coy., 189, 200
- Commando, No. 5, 168, 171, 175, 176, 179, 182, 194, 196, 203
- No. 20 (16) Sqdn. South African Air Force, 190 (f.n.)

## DODECANESE

- Division—  
8th Indian, 214
- Brigade—  
234th, 215, 218, 220, 227
- Regiments—  
Buffis (Royal East Kent), 4th Bn., 228, 231, 233, 234, 236, 237, 238  
Durham Light Infantry, 1st Bn., 218–9, 221, 223–4  
King's Own Royal (Lancaster) 1st Bn., 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 238  
Royal Irish Fusiliers, 2nd Bn., 218, 231, 233, 234, 235, 236, 238  
Royal West Kent, 2nd Bn., 218, 232, 234, 236, 237, 238, 241
- 13th Frontier Force Rifles, 4th Bn., 228
- 28th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Bty. R.A., 218  
3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Bty. R.A., 218, 232  
4th ———, R.A., 219
- 74th Field Coy. R.E., 223  
9th Indian Field Coy., 219
- Long Range Desert Group (L.R.D.G.), A. Sqdn., 218, 225, 226, 228–9, 232, 233, 234, 236, 237, 239  
Special Boat Squadron (S.B.S.), 216, 217–8, 224, 227, 228, 232, 234, 236, 238, 239, 242
- Greek Sacred Squadron, 229, 240, 241



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